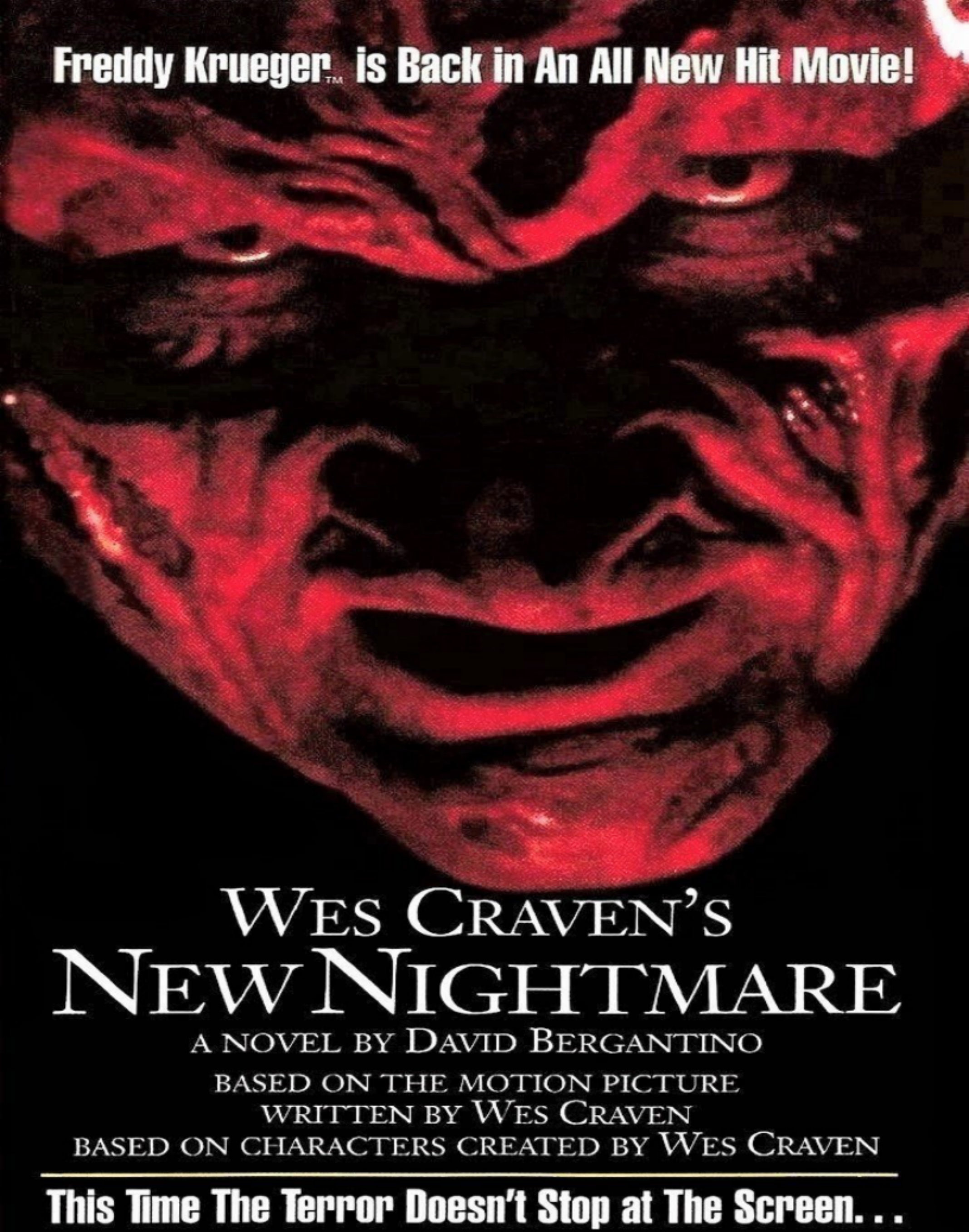

Freddy Krueger™ is Back in An All New Hit Movie!
WES CRAVEN'S
NEW NIGHTMARE
A NOVEL BY DAVID BERGANTINO
BASED ON THE MOTION PICTURE
WRITTEN BY WES CRAVEN
BASED ON CHARACTERS CREATED BY WES CRAVEN
This Time The Terror Doesn't Stop at The Screen. . .

THE SCARIEST NIGHTMARE IS THE ONE BEHIND THE CAMERA!

Ten years ago, legendary horror director Wes Craven created Freddy Krueger, one of the screen's most unforgettable monsters. Now actress Heather Langenkamp is about to return to her role of "Nancy," Freddy's first and greatest foe, in the newest and most ambitious "Nightmare" movie yet.

But the line between fiction and reality becomes terrifyingly blurred, as Heather begins to have horrible dreams while mysterious accidents threaten those around her. As the ultimate "Freddy" movie rushes into production, the cast and crew find themselves stalked as though Freddy himself had escaped from the movies into real life.

But Freddy Krueger is just a fictional character . . . or is he?

HORROR ON THE SET!

Without warning, the Claw flew at Chuck, burying the razors in his throat. He jerked back with a gurgling scream, grabbing at the Claw, finally tearing it away. Chuck's throat became a horrific fountain, blood spurting from between his fingers. The Claw landed on the table with a thump and skittered away, disappearing among the tools and equipment.

A ball of terror formed inside Heather . . .

Wes Craven's New Nightmare

by
David Bergantino



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NEW YORK

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This Book is Dedicated to

My Parents,
Robert and Laura Bergantino,

Who gave me the Love, the Wisdom, the Knowledge
(and when absolutely necessary, the Money)
to accomplish anything in the world,
and to do so without an inordinate amount of selfishness,
to have a lot of Fun, whatever I’m doing,
and to be Happy and make others Happy along the way

and to the memories of

Betty Schwartz,
my teacher and friend

and

David Bonnot,
my very dear friend

Wes Craven's
New Nightmare

INTRODUCTION

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
North Hollywood, Calif.
June 29, 1994

4:47 A.M. Finally finished the book. I'm lucky it didn't finish me first.

What a great first opportunity, it seemed, writing the novelization of the new *Elm Street* movie. It'd be an easy write—just adapt the screenplay into a novel—and I'd get some exposure.

But no one ever told me exactly what I'd be exposed *to.*

Still, a job's a job, an in's an in, and considering what I've been through, I think the book came out all right. It should do decent sales, as movie novelizations go. Unsuspecting, horror-starved teens—could *anyone* be horror-starved in today's world?—will read it and think they're simply enjoying a good, scary story.

This journal and scrapbook tell the truth, about the story *of* the book and the story *behind* the book. For the sake of everyone involved, I'll keep the truth to myself. Besides, there's a chance I'll get over my fear of writing and want to go back in the business. No need to burn bridges by airing anyone's bloody laundry.

For now, I'm not sure what I'll do with myself. Probably wouldn't be able to hold even a mall job, especially if the mall had a bookstore in it. I think I'll just go to the beach and think about it.

Whatever happens, I should be all right—if the nightmares stop.

PROLOGUE

The howling demons gathered, rumbling and roaring. Great silver snakes clung to the walls, hissing in chorus, dripping venom, waiting. Amid this hellish cacophony, a human figure worked methodically to create something unholy.

A hammer struck. Sparks flew. Steel married sinew. A hand was taking shape. It was powerful, organic, and pulsed with a life all its own.

This was the boiler room, where raging fires gave the demon furnaces their infernal voices. Clouds of steam billowed from valves in serpentine pipes. Drops of water fell from them into oily puddles. The boiler room—more sinister than ever. As the shadowy figure started to attach gleaming razors to the fingers of the metal hand—now a claw—its true nature was revealed. It was the glove. His *glove.*

The man affixed the final, lethal blade to the last steel finger. Now complete, it trembled and flexed like some powerful, newborn creature becoming aware of itself. The man caressed the Claw, proud of his work. But he was not finished. Not yet. Despite the resemblance, this was no glove to be worn. It was solid, meant to be a part of the body, not a mere accessory.

Putting the Claw aside, the man rested his right hand on the worktable. His left hand gripped the handle of a giant cleaver. The blade's firelight-twisted shadow danced over the wrist of the man's right hand in anticipatory celebration. Then the cleaver struck, slicing through the man's wrist and biting into the table beneath. Ignoring the twitching hand, the man raised his gory stump. Thick blood gushed from severed veins in pulsating streams.

"More blood!" someone shouted. "More blood!"

Heather Langenkamp's five-year-old son, Dylan, squirmed in her lap, trying to see. Her hands held tight over his eyes. He had never been allowed to see one of her previous movies, yet somehow her husband, Chase, had talked her into bringing him on the set of this one.

Yes, here she was making another *Nightmare on Elm Street* picture. And she wasn't sure why. They used to be such fun. But that was back when Heather was younger, caught up in the whole Hollywood, living-your-dream excitement. Blood and violence never bothered her then. Now she was an adult with a husband and young son. In the

intervening years, the world had become a dangerous and violent place, the television screens filled daily with news of real-life atrocities. And they didn't just happen in faraway, foreign countries anymore. Her own neighborhood no longer seemed safe. In a world like that, what place did horror movies have? No wonder they were out of vogue.

Still, Heather had always enjoyed making movies. She should be having fun.

Sighing, she turned back to the scene being filmed. A camera moved in for a dramatic close-up of the bloody stump as it was thrust into the Claw's cuff. Tendons snaked out of it, grafting the Claw to the end of the actor's arm. It was a triumph of state-of-the-art special effects. Once the process was complete, the actor turned and slashed menacingly at the camera.

"Cut!" called Wes Craven, the film's writer and director—and the "father" of Freddy Krueger. "Fantastic!" He was tall, skinny, and appeared utterly harmless. It was a wonder that such a nice guy from Cleveland had come up with a character as evil—yet somehow beloved—as Freddy Krueger. A buzzer sounded and the lights went up. The faux demons' voices were snuffed and the serpent chorus dried up, replaced by the sounds of chatting. In less than a minute, the character of the place changed from that of a nightmare to something more like a church social. Heather removed her hands from Dylan's eyes.

Craven ran up to Chase, the special-effects supervisor on the film and designer of the mechanical claw. Chase Porter had been an assistant on the first *Elm Street* a decade ago. His courtship with Heather began when he faked a graphically bloody injury to attract her attention. At the time, she thought he was immature. So what that he was handsome and had a smile that gave her palpitations. Obviously, he was a perpetual juvenile and she didn't want anything to do with a man like *that.* Two years later they were married. By the time Dylan arrived, Chase had started his own special-effects company, working mostly in television commercials. He had worked hard, picked up a few low-budget feature films, and eventually landed the top effects job on the new *Elm Street* movie. And now he shepherded his own immature assistants.

"You're a genius, Chase!" Craven told him. "This makes Freddy's old hand look like Mother Teresa's." Chase thanked him modestly, and with a nod indicated the two young men standing next to him, each holding syringes and tubing that led to the Claw. Craven praised them just as enthusiastically. "You too, Terry, Chuck. Great blood!" And he meant it. It had been great blood.

The director's acknowledgment of them almost made the assistants swoon.

"Thank you," squeaked Terry.

"It's some of our best work," Chuck replied, blushing. At least Heather assumed by the tone of his voice that he was blushing; he was covered head to toe in sticky, red liquid, so she couldn't be sure.

Both in their late twenties, Terry was the tall, lanky Laurel to Chuck's somewhat overweight Hardy. They were as proficient a team of effects technicians as the silent screen team had been as comedians. Chase relied on them heavily.

With one last thumbs-up to Chase and his crew, Craven sped away to prepare the next shot. Chase sat with Heather and Dylan while the assistants disconnected the Claw from its tubing. After a minute, Chuck walked by with the dripping Claw. Heather noticed her son staring at it. So did Chase. He reached over and rumpled Dylan's hair.

"Want to see some neat stuff?" he asked with a wink, and took Dylan by the hand. Heather stopped them. This wasn't the time for show-and-tell. Especially not the place. Chase knew how she felt.

"Chase, no—" she protested, but before she could say more, Chase vetoed her.

"Come on. It's only make-believe." He pulled Dylan away from her and the two plunged into the mazelike off-set area. Heather hurried to catch up. At least she could keep them out of trouble. And then later she and Chase would have a talk about all this.

When she found them, Dylan was staring wide-eyed at a vast assortment of bloody body parts and demonic heads. But what she noticed were all the leering Freddy Krueger faces looking down at her from the shelves. Heather shuddered. This stuff was creepy enough to give her—and certainly Dylan—nightmares. Even looking away didn't help. She could somehow still feel Freddy's sightless eyes boring into her. Trying to ignore the disturbing sensation, she watched as Chase offered Dylan a carton of Chinese food.

"You hungry, Dylan?" The container was placed in Dylan's hands before he could answer. He opened it—and the head of a fanged reptile sprang out, startling him. Terry and Chuck snickered in the background.

"Gotcha!" Chase laughed and took the container back.

"Chase!" snapped Heather. She didn't think that was very funny. But Dylan did, a smile coming to his face. Chase just winked at her, telling her to calm down. He turned over the container to show that the creature was only a puppet. Heather started to relax—until Chuck brought the Claw over to the workbench near her.

"It should have flexed more," he told Chase. "I think the servos got shorted out with blood." Tech talk, she thought. Blah blah blah.

"Insulate 'em with some Styro!" Chase scolded his assistant good-naturedly. "It wasn't supposed to be submerged, for Pete's sake."

Heather found herself staring at the Claw. It was a car crash—or much worse—waiting to happen. She wanted Dylan taken home now. She was about to tell Chase that, but instead, she said, "I don't like that thing."

Chase looked at her funny. "This thing puts bread on our table." Maybe, but the fact remained that she didn't like it. Not in the least. Dylan, meanwhile, was trying to decide for himself. Finished with the reptilian jack-in-the-box, he eyed the Claw warily, holding his father's hand for security.

"Is it alive, Daddy?"

Before he could answer, a voice called out, "Heather, you're in the next shot!" It came from no discernible direction, nor did it sound even vaguely familiar. Heather felt a little foggy. Chase began speaking, his voice floating to her from far away, even though they were in the same room. Had Dylan asked if the Claw was alive?

"Might as well be, Dylan. State-of-the-art animatronics, enhanced with bio-organic grafting." He listed the materials that made up the Claw. "Bull tendons, nerve bundles from a Doberman, even part of the brain of a homicidal primate was . . ." The list seemed to go on forever.

While Chase droned on, light flashed at the edge of her vision. On the worktable, the Claw had begun to move. Work lights glinted off the razors as they whirled slowly in the air.

"Chase . . ." He saw it, too, and stopped talking.

"Hey!"

Chuck looked up from where he was making a sandwich. He was clearly surprised to see the Claw in motion.

Chase reached for the Claw. In a metallic blur, it lashed out at him. He cried out in pain and pulled back. Blood dripped from his hand. The cuts didn't look too deep; mostly, Chase just seemed shocked. With his good hand, he shut off the remote.

"Shit!" Chase swore under his breath.

Chuck approached the Claw, curious but unfazed.

"Must have been picking up signals from the A.D.'s walkie-talkies." With a screwdriver, he flipped the Claw. It whined—a small half-machine, half-animal sound. Chills shot down Heather's spine.

Terry put his hand on the Claw and asked, "You sure it's turned off?"

"It's off."

"Funny. It's warm. Like a real hand." Terry stepped away to give Chuck a closer look. He started to lean down. Heather would have stopped him, but the fog had drifted to her limbs. She couldn't move.

Without warning, the Claw flew at Chuck, burying the razors in his throat. He jerked back with a gurgling scream, grabbing at the Claw, finally tearing it away. Chuck's throat became a horrific fountain, blood spurting from between his fingers. The Claw landed on the table with a thump and skittered away, disappearing among the tools and equipment.

A ball of terror formed inside Heather and rose swiftly. She managed to scream as Chase grabbed the remote and smashed it, throwing the batteries away. Just then, all the furnaces burst into flame at the same time. Steam howled from the giant pipes. Craven was shouting, "What the hell's going on here? Kill the effects!" But the noise soon drowned out his voice.

Chuck crashed blindly into Chase and they both went down. Terry raked through the jumble atop the workbench, searching for the Claw. It emerged from behind some special-effects rubble and quickly dropped to the floor. Heather could only watch as one razor sliced through Terry's ankle. He shrieked and fell, and when he hit the ground, the Claw drove itself right into his heart, burying the long blades up to the steel fingertips. His body convulsed once and was still. The Claw wrenched itself out and spun around.

It scrambled toward Chase, who was trying to untangle himself from Chuck's convulsing body. Heather's ball of terror rose into a scream once more. Chase kept his eye on the Claw as it sped toward him. He struggled harder to push Chuck away but was pinned by his assistant's dead weight.

The Claw climbed up to Chuck's shoulder and perched there. The blades spread wide, casting thin shadows that divided Chase's face into segments.

All at once, the furnaces began to shake, as if ready to explode. A horrible rumbling came from deep within the set. Chase shouted to Heather, but she was still paralyzed.

Their eyes met as the Claw tensed to leap at Chase. And she could do nothing. Nothing at all. Everything went black.

* * *

Someone was shaking her.

"Heather! Earthquake!" Chase's voice.

She was vaguely aware that Chase was trying to pull her from the

bed. He was shaking, too. So was the entire room.

“Get in the doorway!” He had to yell above the rumbling noise and the sounds of breaking glass.

“Momeee!” Her son’s voice instantly jump-started her consciousness.

“Dylan!”

She was now fully awake as the floor pitched her out of the doorway. A framed picture fell, a shower of glass narrowly missing Chase as he staggered behind her. They bounced down the hall to Dylan’s room. He was trapped in bed by the constant movement of the earth. Before Heather could reach him, there came one last huge jolt.

Then it stopped.

Not yet convinced the earthquake was truly over, nobody moved for several seconds. Pulsating, electronic sounds floated in from the street. The image of landing spaceships jumped into Heather’s mind, the earthquake announcing their arrival. She could almost believe that. This *was* Los Angeles, after all.

“Car alarms,” Chase said, noticing her perplexed look. “You okay?”

She nodded as she lifted Dylan, who had begun to cry softly. He was hot, his pajamas soaked in sweat. What a big scare for her little guy. Dylan had inherited his father’s looks, but for the most part, he got his personality from his mother. She sometimes worried about how serious and adultlike he was most of the time. He never quite seemed relaxed. When she told Chase her worries, he said that just because the boy was intense didn’t mean anything was wrong. Or that he wasn’t happy. And it’s not like he doesn’t know how to have fun, Chase would offer as his final proof. That was true. Dylan wasn’t a moper. He played, just like other kids—though more intensely. Chase wasn’t given to denial and his words made sense. He cared deeply for Dylan and was a good father. She knew that she tended to worry too much. Good mothers did that.

“You okay, chief?” Chase asked gently.

“No.” But the tears had stopped. Dylan was trying to be brave for Mommy and Daddy. This was when she worried most, when he held things in. He was still radiating heat.

“You have a fever, sweetie?” Dylan shook his head. She kissed his forehead to check his temperature—her own mother used to do that, calling it a “ther-mommy-ter”—and although Dylan was warm, he didn’t have a fever.

“Just an earthquake, Dylan.” Chase rubbed Dylan’s back to comfort him. “Every once in a while we get a few.”

“No biggie, really,” said Heather. But Dylan wasn’t entirely

convinced yet.

Dylan looked up as his father brushed hair away from his eyes. The frightened look on his face made him seem older than his five years.

“Daddy, blood,” Dylan said quietly, and pointed.

Heather followed his gaze and saw blood dripping from Chase’s hand. Panic started seeping into her from cracks made by the earthquake. It was the same hand that had been slashed in her dream. Chase saw her look and wrapped his bleeding fingers in one of Dylan’s T-shirts.

“Nothing, guys,” he said quickly. “Just a scratch.”

It’s worse than that, Heather thought. The T-shirt was already soaked with blood.

“Where’d you . . . get that?” she asked nervously.

Chase shrugged. “The picture, I guess.” But she wasn’t really listening, only staring at his hand. “When it fell. It’s nothing, really.” The tone of his voice made her look up. She saw by his expression he was trying hard to convince her so that she wouldn’t upset Dylan. “I’ll put a bandage on it. Don’t worry about it.” Then he flashed both of them a big, don’t-worry-be-happy smile and left the room.

But Heather was worried about it. Very much. And by the look on his face, so was Dylan. But she decided to follow Chase’s lead and try not to upset their son any further. The earthquake had been bad enough. So she smiled at Dylan and told him that Daddy would be all right. As she set him down on the bed, she wondered how Chase could have gotten that cut. From the picture, he said. Of course, that must be it. She quickly accepted that explanation. It was the only one that made sense.

Another possibility occurred to her, but it was a little nutty. Actually, it was what-kind-of-basket-would-you-like-to-weave-today? crazy. Heather forced the thought from her mind. But it took effort.

**From the Journal of
David Bergantino
May 9, 1994**

Slow getting started. Always happens this way.

Thought I remembered an earthquake like the one in the script. Went to the library and *voilà!* found the article below. Very cool. I wonder if he added any other little touches that give the story "authenticity?"

If I have time, I'll check it out.

Los Angeles Times
March 16, 1993
Page 2–A

5.5 Quake Rocks Los Angeles

Associated Press

SAN FERNANDO VALLEY—An earthquake measuring 5.5 on the Richter scale shook Los Angeles in the morning hours, jolting people from their beds and breaking glass all over the city. It was the latest in what seismologists are calling a "swarm" of related seismic activity. The epicenter was located in the city of Sylmar, in the north San Fernando Valley. No serious damage or injuries were reported. The earthquake was felt as far south as San Diego and as far east as Las Vegas.

1

Earthquakes are insatiable lovers of kitchens. No other room in the house has as many small, breakable objects per square foot that are as easily dislodged. Heather's kitchen showed signs of a torrid affair. Every cabinet door had flown open and the contents dumped out. Whatever could shatter invariably did when it hit the floor. Chase swept the broken glass into one corner while Heather sorted through what remained in the cupboards. Some of the sturdier coffee mugs had survived, along with some plates that had been at the bottom of a stack.

As Heather went about reorganizing the cupboard, a similar process was taking place within her mind, with less success. In the shadows of both places were sharp fragments that could cut her if she wasn't careful. The nightmare had frightened her far more than the earthquake. Each aftershock—they'd had a few small ones—brought her closer to screaming. They reminded her of how she felt when the furnaces seemed about to explode.

It was only a dream, she kept telling herself. Like the rest. She'd had several nightmares in the last two months. Only this one was worse, a fearful voice deep inside her whispered. She silenced it. Even if it was worse, she thought, it was still only a dream. But the fearful voice didn't go away. It simply floated quietly in her mind, waiting for the next opportunity to speak up. Every time it did, the voice was louder and more shrill.

In a far corner of the cupboard she was sorting through, Heather spotted a cup lying on its side. It was made of bone china and was decorated with a flowered design. At first glance, she thought it had survived the earthquake. But then she saw the jagged spikes where the handle had broken off. The flowers were now caught in a spiderweb of cracks, and a large chip scarred the rim. It had been a beautiful cup, one of her favorites. She sighed, the sound mingling with that of the kettle that began to whistle on the stove. Heather shuddered, remembering the steam pipes of the boiler room.

Chase stopped sweeping and took the kettle off the burner. Heather looked over. Now, *there* was a bright spot in her day, watching Chase in the kitchen. Most mornings, he'd be wearing only pajama bottoms. At the moment he wore a robe and heavy slippers to protect himself from broken glass. It'd be a while before he could walk around without wearing something on his feet. Too bad, she thought. He had

perfect feet. Luckily, the rest of his body was just as pleasant to look at. Through exercise, he avoided the excess bulge around the middle so many men acquired shortly after hitting thirty. Okay, so maybe he had begun to grow hair on his back, but that wasn't enough to make her hire a lawyer and begin divorce proceedings. In all, she felt lucky to have him as her bright spot every day.

Chase brought her some instant coffee in one of the survivor mugs. She took it and held up the flowered cup.

"One of my mom's cups got broken." He took it from her, examined it, and handed it back.

"I'm sorry," he said dutifully. "At least *we're* in one piece." He gave her a half-smile and shrugged—Chase wasn't big on sentiment—and turned to the table for a piece of toast. He was right, of course. It was a habit of his—to be right—that somehow never became annoying. Heather *was* thankful that, except for the cut on Chase's hand, none of them had been hurt during the quake. Still, this particular set of cups was one of the few pleasant reminders of an often stormy relationship with her mother.

And just like that, Heather stumbled upon a dangerous shard in her mind. Her mother. Painful memories threatened to surface. She barely held them at bay with the thought that today might be a good day to start seeing a shrink. An excellent day, in fact. A professional talk might be just the thing to exorcise some demons and silence some voices. Unfortunately, the earthquake probably gave a lot of people the same idea. Appointments might be scarce.

The sudden blare of the living room television interrupted her latest self-distraction. A story on the earthquake was just ending. The local newscaster described the morning's event as "the latest of what seismologists are calling"—and then he paused in the melodramatic fashion that even the network anchors had begun to adopt, and intoned gravely—"a swarm." After another brief pause, the newscaster, now raising his left eyebrow to show concern, launched into a report on bloody battles in the Eastern European republics. He spoke over graphic footage that showed the aftermath of a mortar attack. Dylan sat at the counter having breakfast, not watching the television, but absorbing the ghastly news all the same. Little kids didn't need death and violence along with their cereal, Heather thought.

"Do we have to watch that?" she snapped at Chase, assuming he was responsible. But he was on the other side of the kitchen, finishing up the sweeping. He turned and blinked at her, surprised at the tone of her voice.

"I thought *you* turned it on," he said mildly, and walked into the

living room to switch off the television. It took him a minute to find the remote, onto which a pile of magazines had toppled. Heather ignored Chase's questioning look and turned to Dylan. He wasn't eating breakfast so much as sculpting it. The peaks and valleys of his oatmeal formed a face. Large, feral eyes stared out and a mouth gaped savagely. The image was vaguely familiar and very disconcerting.

Suddenly, Heather was about to laugh. Of all things, she was working herself into a frenzy over oatmeal. It was absurd. She imagined herself at a police station, sitting behind smoked glass, staring at a lineup of thugs that included such well-known criminal elements as a bowl of Cheerios, buttered toast, a glass of orange juice, and a Pop-Tart (the unfrosted ones were prone to violence). The farina looked familiar, but no . . . Then: "The oatmeal, Officer! It was the oatmeal!" Case closed.

The laughter—which would have been hysterical and uncontrollable had it escaped—died in her throat when she looked back down at Dylan's bowl. The face remained. And her little instant mind-movie hadn't made it seem any less menacing.

"Dylan," she said too sharply, "it's breakfast, not arts and crafts." He looked up at her abruptly with his innocent, curious eyes. Just like his father's eyes. Chase had stopped moving behind her. She could feel him watching. *"What?"* she asked, spinning around to face him. Chase didn't speak immediately, but chose his words carefully to make sure he wouldn't upset her.

"You get any sleep last night?" he finally said.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Dylan staring, waiting to see if Chase's question would set her off. She became painfully aware of how her mood was affecting her family. Her shoulders sagged, and she took a deep breath.

"More or less." She turned back to Dylan. He tensed, unsure of how she was going to speak to him.

"Dylan, time to get dressed." The fight was out of her for the moment and she felt more exhausted than anything else. "I'm late."

Now Dylan was frowning. "You going away?"

"Just for a few hours. Julie'll be with you." To her surprise, Dylan just sighed, pushed his chair away from the table, and went up to his room. Chase, satisfied for the moment that Heather wasn't on the verge of another outburst, followed Dylan out of the kitchen.

Julie was Heather's best friend and Dylan's favorite baby-sitter. She absolutely adored Dylan. There had been other sitters—nannies, college kids, daughters of friends—but lately, Heather hadn't felt comfortable leaving Dylan with anyone else. Luckily, Julie was eager to help out. Perhaps it was because she had no children of her own

yet, but Heather didn't think so. She was just that kind of friend.

Dylan's lack of enthusiasm was puzzling at first. Normally, "Julie" was the magic word. News of Julie's impending arrival always thrilled him. Sometimes his reaction would even make Heather a little jealous. The earthquake must have been a bigger scare than he let on, she figured.

Alone in the kitchen, Heather started to clear the table. She reached for Dylan's breakfast bowl and froze. The evil, grinning face stared up at her. Wielding Dylan's spoon as if it were Excalibur, she plunged it into the oatmeal and stirred. The face was gone before she reached the sink. But she didn't feel any better, even after she scraped the oatmeal into the drain and turned the disposal on for a full minute.

Up in the bedroom, Heather dressed in silence. She could feel Chase studying her from across the room. In the cracked mirror, she saw what he was looking at: her slim, attractive body and thick, auburn hair that spilled over her shoulders. Unfortunately, the mirror also showed the dark circles under her eyes. That's the thing about stress, she thought. It's great for the figure but not so great for the face.

Chase wrapped his arms around her shoulders. For a terrifying moment, she didn't recognize his touch. Then she could feel his heart beating, strong and steady, as he hugged her against his chest.

"Anything other than the obvious bothering you?"

"Five earthquakes in three weeks is enough." But she knew he wasn't talking about earthquakes.

Chase's look of concern was reflected in the mirror. It was the usual expression he wore before leaving town, as he was doing that morning. A commercial job was going to take him to Palmdale for two days. He was always reluctant to leave her and Dylan, especially in recent weeks. Today he seemed particularly sensitive to her mood.

"There hasn't been another call, has there?"

Just the thought of the phone calls made her tense. They had started almost two months ago and gone on for several weeks. Somebody with a deep, cruel voice and chilling laugh, pretending to be her film nemesis, Freddy Krueger. The voice would not threaten her exactly, but taunt. Whoever it was had sounded truly dangerous. And he would only call when she was nearby to answer the phone. Like he knew she was there.

He had been in her mail as well. Grimy envelopes had appeared. They were unaddressed and each contained only one thing: a sheet of paper on which was pasted a single letter cut from a newspaper headline. One day, both the calls and the letters just stopped. So she

answered Chase with a shake of her head.

"Good." Chase's tone of voice changed. He was trying to lend her some of his strength. "Maybe he got run over by a truck."

"If anything, he feels closer," she told him, crushing his attempt to make light of the situation. His earnest look faltered a bit. She knew how frustrated he became when she wouldn't allow him to console her. That was why Heather didn't want to mention the latest nightmare. Chase couldn't make her feel any better about that, either. But she couldn't ignore the look in his eyes. He knew there was more to her story this morning than the earthquake, and he wanted to help. Identify the problem and solve it. That was his way.

"It's giving me nightmares," she finally admitted.

"You have one last night?"

She nodded yes. He hugged her again and started stroking her hair. At times like these, she was his little girl. His voice would become deep and soothing, and he'd talk her fears away. It often worked.

"It's just a reaction to the earthquake, Heather."

"Maybe." But she wasn't feeling safe or comfortable right now, even in his arms. Too much had happened lately. "Or maybe I shouldn't do this interview today." She was due to appear on a local talk show this morning. It was her first television appearance in a very long time. At first she had thought it would do her some good. Right now she wasn't so sure.

Chase turned her around so they faced each other. "You've got to get back on the horse sometime." Frustration crept back into his voice. She didn't help matters by rolling her eyes at his cliché. He released her and began to pace. "Look, you had a nutcase making harassing phone calls. I know how scary that feels—"

"No you don't," she broke in. He had only heard the voice from the safety of a police recording.

"Okay," he said softly. "But it still doesn't mean it can't be over with."

"What if it *isn't* over?" She was challenging him and pleading for an answer at the same time.

He considered her question and decided to change his approach. "Maybe you should tell me your dream."

She shrugged. Maybe it wasn't worth discussing. In perspective, the nightmare was really the least of her worries. But Chase wasn't giving her a choice now. Besides, she had made such an issue of it.

"It was nothing," she said, but the tremble in her voice contradicted her words. "We were both working on some movie, and a special-effects thing went horribly wrong. Terry and Chuck were hurt." Her

mind flashed a picture of their bloody corpses. She pushed it away and continued. “You were almost—” She could see the shadows of the claws across his face. “You were even cut.” She looked down fearfully at his hand.

For a moment Chase seemed a little frightened himself. It occurred to her that he might not really know how he cut his hand but didn’t want to scare her. He never talked about dreams, so it was possible he had even had a nightmare, too. Recently, she’d watched him toss in bed at night, but in the morning, he claimed to have forgotten if he had been dreaming. Looking at his face again, she saw that the fear was gone—if it had been there in the first place.

“You were probably half-awake and saw me get nicked by that picture glass. Dreams work like that.” He was trying very hard to convince her. She wished she could believe him. “You want me not to go on this job?” he asked suddenly.

This offer had come fairly often in the last two months. Heather had never taken him up on it, but this time she came close. But it wouldn’t be fair to either of them. She was a grown woman, his wife, not his little girl. Not anybody’s little girl anymore. She steadied herself with a good, swift mental kick in the butt and squeezed his hands.

“Just be careful,” she said, shaking her head.

“I should survive two days in Palmdale supplying soap bubbles for a detergent commercial, don’t you think?” He was holding her with his eyes again.

Heather suddenly felt silly about all this. He certainly wasn’t going to cut himself on bubbles.

“Guess so,” she said. Chase seemed unconvinced that she had recovered so quickly. Truth was, she was still very shaken, but she wanted him to be able to leave without worrying too much. So she gave him a bright smile. He tried to resist, but finally, the smile did the trick.

“Forty-eight hours,” he said with a wink. “I’ll be back before you know it.” He gave her a quick kiss but did not let go of her. Then they kissed again, this time long enough to last them the next two days. With that, he picked up his overnight bag and turned to leave.

Heather closed her eyes. Another minute, and she would have begged him to stay. And that would have ruined it for both of them. She heard him say goodbye to Dylan. Then the front door closed. He was gone. Forty-eight hours. An eternity.

Heather let her breath out slowly as she calmed down. Then she heard an unexpected, brittle snap and opened her eyes. A crack appeared on her bedroom wall. Then another. Soon, four thin, parallel cracks snaked diagonally down the wall in front of her eyes. She

stared at them, her disbelief rapidly giving way to terror. Her fearful inner voice rose up suddenly, speaking over the sound of the television that had just come on downstairs. Stop him! the voice cried. Don't let Chase leave. She listened to it and bolted down the stairs.

The image on the living room television stopped her in her tracks. Her own terrified face stared out from the screen. But it wasn't her face, exactly. It was Nancy—that character she played in *A Nightmare on Elm Street.* And less than a foot from the screen was Dylan, watching the movie impassively. On the screen, Tina's corpse appeared in the doorway to the classroom, enshrouded by a bloody body bag.

"Naaaannn-cccyyyyy!" moaned Tina.

"Dylan, I don't want you *watching* that." Heather's anger momentarily displaced her fear. Dylan knew better than to watch that kind of movie, even if his mother was in this particular one. She grabbed the remote and zapped off the television. Then she angrily tore the plug out of the wall for good measure. Instantly, Dylan began howling as if she were beating him. "Dylan, stop it!" she yelled, barely able to hear herself over his howling. "What's gotten into you?"

The phone rang and Dylan immediately became silent. She looked down at him and he stared up, his eyes reflecting the pain she had heard in his howling. The phone rang again. She snatched it up, not taking her eyes off her son.

"Hello?"

A strange static was her only reply. She quickly realized the sound wasn't static at all, but the crackling of flames. Soon they roared in her ears. Then the voice.

"One, two . . ." came a raspy singsong. It was the caller, flawlessly imitating the voice of Freddy Krueger. The murderous, mocking tone was perfect. And perfectly terrifying. The furnace noises enhanced the effect. She slammed down the phone and ran for the front door.

By the time she got to the front step, Chase's pickup truck was disappearing down the street. She waved her arm, but he must have thought she was only saying a last goodbye. He honked and drove out of sight.

Still very frightened, she went back into the house, closing the door behind her. Dylan still sat in front of the television, gazing up at her with the same awful look as before.

"Someone's coming," he said ominously.

"What? Dylan . . . no one's coming here." At that moment the ground lurched slightly, rattling the house. She ran to Dylan and they braced for another aftershock, but the ground stopped moving.

Then the doorbell rang.

All at once, Heather was certain that her personal “Freddy” had come for her. The last call must have been made from a sidewalk pay phone. She watched the door, ready for it to burst inward, knocking her to the ground. Then her tormentor would enter. No doubt he was large, powerful, and quite insane. Would Dylan get away? Would he kill her immediately, or would he first—

“Heather?” The voice coming from outside wasn’t even male, let alone threatening. Julie had arrived, as she—and Dylan—had expected. Heather shook off the latest assault of paranoia and opened the door. Julie was blue-eyed, pretty in an uncomplicated way with straight, straw-colored hair. Usually, a broad grin perched on her face, but not at the moment. The corners of her blue eyes crinkled at Heather’s haggard appearance.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, Julie, I’m sorry. I thought—” She couldn’t tell her friend what she had really been thinking. “There was an earthquake, I think. Little one, but . . .”

“Big truck went by right before you opened the door. Life on the fault line,” she proclaimed brightly. Julie was one of those terminally cheerful people, just the kind of person Heather needed to lift her spirits. Dylan stood a few feet away, waiting to be seen. Heather stepped back and let Julie in. “Hey, tiger!” She rushed right to him and hoisted Dylan into the air. He started to giggle. Good. His spirits could use some lifting, too.

Still, the morning was not over and Heather’s feeling of dread hadn’t fully subsided. The effects of the phone call—not to mention Dylan’s bizarre behavior—were not easily overcome. At least Julie could help with Dylan.

“You think he has a fever?” Heather asked. “He felt warm to me this morning.”

Julie put her hand on Dylan’s forehead and shrugged. “Seems okay to me. That all that’s wrong? You seem—”

The ringing phone interrupted Julie. Heather snatched up the phone immediately. He’s not gonna get me like before, she thought. A few minutes ago, she hadn’t expected the call. She had been off balance. Not this time. Not by a long shot.

“Leave us alone, you creep!” she shouted into the phone. The line was silent. Perhaps she had shocked the lunatic into forgetting to activate his furnace sound effect.

“L.A. Limousine, ma’am,” said a startled voice. “Just wanted you to know I’m out front.” The limo! Sure enough, a black limo sat at the curb in front of her house. “Uh, sorry. Hang on a minute.” Oh, good

move, Heather. She set the receiver down and leaned on it a moment with her eyes closed. Then she looked up at Julie. The other woman was stunned. Dylan was at Julie's side now, holding her hand.

"Heather, what *is* it?"

Dylan grew sullen again. The joy that lit up his face seconds ago had already faded.

"Dunno. Just have this feeling today . . ." She trailed off. She didn't want to talk. Crying seemed to be next on the agenda. But she didn't want to do that, either.

"Mommy, stay home," said Dylan. Then he turned and went up to his room without another word. It wasn't a request. His tone implied that he was giving her vitally important advice that he expected her to follow without question.

Heather watched him leave. A minute ago he'd actually laughed.

Julie read the sad expression and winked. "He'll be fine. Don't worry." She went off after Dylan. Soon, conspiratorial whispers drifted down from his room. Julie was attempting to cheer Dylan up. So far, it was slow going. Heather listened at the bottom of the stairs. No matter what toy Julie suggested or what cartoonish voice she spoke in, his monotones indicated he hadn't cheered up.

I won't leave him like this, Heather decided. So she picked up the phone and dialed.

"Studio B," answered a generic, Studio B-like voice.

"Hi. This is Heather Langenkamp." She tried hard to sound breezy and casual. They weren't going to like this.

"The car not there yet?" he asked brightly.

"No, I . . ." She couldn't sustain the breezy bullshit and lowered her voice. "Listen, I can't make it today."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. She could hear sounds in the background, but they were normal, generic Studio B-like sounds. No flames. No steam.

"You're kidding, right?" The voice was in a panic. Heather understood what a horrible thing she was doing. But she couldn't help it.

"I'm sorry, I can't—" she stammered. But Mr. Studio B was now angry and he cut her off.

"Listen, dammit—"

But she couldn't listen. And he *wouldn't* listen to her, because her explanation would make no sense. Even if it did, judging by the tone of his voice, there was nothing acceptable she could say.

"I just can't," she said, and hung up on Mr. Studio B. That had been a tough call. Not something she did that often. Reliability was very

important to her, in others and in herself. But she had made the decision—or rather, Dylan had made it for her. She was staying. A giggle escaped from the bedroom. Julie was getting through. And how would he feel when he found out Mommy was staying home? Well, let's see how that floats his boat, she thought as she started for his room.

The ringing phone stopped her. It was Mr. Studio B, no doubt, or the limo driver. Either way, she couldn't very well pretend she wasn't home. She lifted the receiver and steeled herself.

"Yes?"

A loud hissing answered her. Steam pipes.

"One, two—" sang "Freddy," catching her off guard once more. She slammed the phone down, almost smashing it.

"Jesus!" God, what timing this psycho had. Then the phone rang again. She stared at the phone for a moment in shock. If it's him, she thought, I'll—but what if it isn't? She had to answer it. And civilly. Her hand did not want to grasp the receiver.

"Hello?" she barely managed.

"Freddy's coming for youuuuuuu—" greeted her.

She recoiled as if she'd been slapped, and slammed the phone down hard. Turning, she vented her anger by kicking a chair. It knocked over a lamp that had survived the earthquake. The ceramic base shattered against the wall and the whole mess fell to the ground. It didn't make her feel any better. Instead, she was sweaty, breathing heavily, and her foot hurt. Heather took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Suddenly, she was aware of someone standing behind her. She whirled. Julie stood on the bottom step, shocked.

"What *is* it, Heather?" Dylan peered out from behind her legs.

Heather tried to compose herself. "Damn caller. Again."

"He started again?" Julie immediately became very sympathetic. She knew all about the caller and how hard it had been on her friend. She came over and gave Heather a hug.

Heather nodded. She was too drained to speak. On top of that, she was looking at Dylan. Fear burned in his eyes. But it was more than fear. Despair, really. What could a five-year-old know about despair? Perhaps he had seen it on the faces of war or famine victims on the news, but that didn't really explain it. He wasn't mimicking despair. The emotion itself radiated from him like the heat of a fever.

And it's your fault, whispered the fearful voice. Heather could not deny it.

A gloomy quiet blanketed the room. Julie started looking uncomfortable. Suddenly, she smiled over-brightly and broke the

silence with, apparently, the first words that came to her mind.

"Sick bastard," she said before she could catch herself. Heather looked at her sharply. "Sorry." She flushed immediately and changed the subject. "Dylan—he doesn't have a fever like you were worried. Probably just your nerves."

"Nerves?" Heather asked, stung by Julie's words. Don't you think I can handle this? she wanted to scream. I'm *not* my mother! But the words didn't come out. She was too shocked. Julie must have realized what she was thinking, because her face became even redder.

"I just meant from the shaker this morning." She was babbling now, hoping to mend the situation. "I mean, everyone's freaked-out at how many we've been having. Then the calls."

Heather was about to shut Julie up before her other foot became lodged in her mouth when the phone rang again. In her anger, she lashed out at the phone.

"Stop calling me, you sonuvabitch!" she screeched into the mouthpiece. Dylan shrank behind Julie's legs. Heather waited, *hoping* the psycho had something to say this time.

"You talk to your agent this way?" It was Jerry. No doubt he had gotten a frantic call from Mr. Studio B. She was in for it now. Normally, Jerry was a sweet old man, the Jewish grandfather she never had. He was an agent from the old school, not a flashy "mover and shaker" like the young hotshots of modern Hollywood. But he was no dinosaur. To this day he could outmove and outshake the sharpest of the "let's do lunch" crowd. But now her sweet Jewish grandfather was pissed off.

"And you try to cancel an appearance on *AM/LA* at the last damn minute? What the hell's *with* you?"

"I'm sorry, Jerry. I just—I can't leave the house right now." Please understand, she wished silently.

"What, you wanna single-handedly bury your career? Lose your house? Put your husband and kid out on the street? Or just give your old agent a heart attack?" he added, trying to inject some humor into the situation. They were all ludicrous notions, anyway, but Heather couldn't defend herself. She could tell he was livid.

"Okay, fine. I'll be there. It's just—the calls started again."

The battle won, Jerry the grandfather relieved Jerry the agent from duty.

"Unfortunately, this kinda crap is part of the business these days, Heather. Have you thought of buying a good handgun?"

"I've got a five-year-old in the house, Jerry!"

"He's an L.A. kid—probably already has one!" Jerry laughed,

quickly telling her, “Kidding!” He expressed sympathy in odd ways, but she knew he was sincere. Then the agent returned. “Look, call me after the interview, okay?” And the line went dead. No one ever said goodbye these days. They just hung up.

During the conversation, Julie had retreated with Dylan up to his room. She now sat on the floor playing with his toy dinosaurs as he sat silently on the bed. They both looked up when Heather entered the room. Julie was trying hard not to say anything. She had already gotten herself into enough trouble.

Dylan looked up sadly, knowing what came next.

“Honey, I gotta go. Forgive me?”

She lifted him off the bed and gave him a big hug. He hugged her in return, but weakly. The morning had been very hard on both of them.

Minutes later Julie and Dylan stood in the front doorway to see Heather out.

“I’ll call the cops for you,” Julie said, her mood lightened considerably. “You’ve got the number on the fridge, right?”

“Thanks. Just give them the time he called. They’re keeping a list, supposedly.”

Julie nearly had to push Heather out the front door. Any later and her friend would be watching the show from the limo’s tiny television. Just when she thought Heather was on her way, she turned and gave Julie a big hug. “Sorry I snapped at you,” she apologized. “My nerves are a little raw these days.”

“ ’S okay,” Julie replied. And it *was* okay. Besides, the job description of “best friend” called for understanding in extraordinary circumstances. And Heather’s circumstances were extraordinary, to say the least. She really didn’t know who could handle what Heather was going through without cracking, even slightly. And that worried Julie sick. But she had slipped badly when she had implied, however innocently, that Heather was imagining things. Heather had confided her family history—stories about her mother and, especially, her grandmother—and was very sensitive about the subject. Julie meant nothing by her comment—and Heather knew it, too—but she should have been more careful. Those moments had been more than a little tense for everyone, so Julie forgave herself; she knew Heather had forgiven her.

She and Dylan both waved goodbye from the front step. Heather waved back—Julie thought the smile almost looked natural—and walked toward the limousine.

As she approached the car, Heather was almost convinced the day was going to turn out all right. Then she saw the driver. From the back, she could see him speaking into the car phone. He was a big man—and bald. The light reflected off the back of his head unevenly, creating the illusion of scarred flesh. She stopped. Freddy Krueger was driving her limousine. He turned toward her and suddenly he was just a bald, middle-aged limo driver, anxious to get under way. Heather forced herself into motion and got into the limousine.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
May 13, 1994

Got a rhythm going, but writing this book is still harder than I thought it would be. My friends have been calling to congratulate me—constantly. Everyone wants to go out and celebrate. Did a lot of celebrating at first, but wasn't getting any work done. For once, discipline has won me over. I'm letting my machine answer the phone from now on.

But I'll tell ya, there's gonna be a *BIG ASS PARTY* when I'm finished writing. Then a "premiere" party for the movie. And a *BIGGER ASS PARTY* when the book comes out.

Soooooo boy!

I can tell things are going well: my dreams are starting to get pretty funky. That always happens when I'm on a good creative jag. These recent dreams have tended to be a little violent, but then again, I'm not writing a children's story! (But maybe I am: the original Grimm's fairy tales are some of the most violent stuff around.)

Anyway, all is well in the world, and I found another interesting article, this time from a supermarket tabloid. I bet it was planted by a shrewd publicist.

The Midnight Star
February 4, 1993
Front cover, sidebar headline

Elm St. Star's Real-Life Nightmare!

The Midnight Star
February 4, 1993
Page 6

Elm Street Star's Real-Life Nightmare: She's Being Stalked by FREDDY!!

Los Angeles—

Fright Femme Heather Langenkamp had enough trouble with Freddy Krueger on the big screen. As heroine of the popular horror movies "A Nightmare on Elm Street," she has had to dispatch the razor-wielding killer twice already. But three's a curse and this time she's calling the cops!

Friends of Langenkamp say the actress has been plagued lately by phone calls, purported to be from the fearsome Freddy himself.

"Heather's really upset over this," says one close friend of the actress. "Some nut keeps calling the house pretending to be Freddy Krueger. He says the most awful, disgusting things. With all the stories these days of stalkers, it's scary. And she has a five-year-old at home, too."

Certain the harassment is the work of "a demented fan," police are monitoring the phones constantly, hoping to trace the calls to their source.

The close friend sent this plea to the stalker: "Okay, so you scared her. Now please, leave her alone. She's not Nancy from the movie. She's a woman trying to raise a family."

2

For untold minutes Heather enjoyed the peace of the limousine, just staring out the window. The day was warm and sunny. Of course, the weather was hardly unique for Los Angeles, but today seemed especially pleasant. She was out of the house, away from the phone, and could see no signs of the earthquake. That suited her just fine.

She felt like a boxer coming to after suffering a major knockout in the fifteenth round of intense fighting. Every crisis had been part of a vicious one-two punch; she had always been reeling when the second blow struck. But the look on Dylan's face had wounded her the most. He was too young to have that much anguish inside of him.

Heather could feel another funk coming on and focused on the sky again to brighten her mood. The smog wasn't too bad today. Even so, it brought to mind a difference between movies and real life. Movies—and dreams, for that matter—were much more colorful than real life. Everything in them was so vivid. On the big screen, you could almost taste what you were seeing. The skies, for example, were always the most amazing blue. In L.A. the sky never got much past a hazy neutral shade, unless the smog was thick and a yellow-brown tint crept in. Even the trees and buildings seemed washed in a pale watercolor in comparison to the bold, saturated hues of a movie-city. The thought of life's drabness didn't bother Heather too much—far more serious things preyed on her mind these days. For now, she enjoyed the peaceful ride to the television studio.

If only the driver would stop staring at her in the rearview mirror.

"You played that girl, in that movie," he finally said, barging in on her solitude. "With the guy with the—" And he pawed the air in what she supposed was an imitation of Freddy's glove. Heather thought he just looked arthritic.

Oh yippee, a fan. Blessed are the fans, she prayed silently, for they keep my career going. She had to remind herself sometimes. Some fans could be a pain in the butt, and unless she blessed them first, she'd forget to be nice to them. She gave the driver a weak smile.

"Yeah, sure, that's you." The man was thrilled. "That's what I love about this job. I get to meet the stars."

Oh please. He looked a little old to be fawning over her.

"I'm hardly a star." A successful, working actress, sure. But not what he was thinking.

"You kidding?" he gasped, his eyes widening in disbelief. "I love your stuff. First was the best—where your girlfriend's cut open and dragged across the ceiling? Awesome!" She could tell he was seeing the gruesome scene in detail in his mind. Fans like him were more than a pain. They gave her the creeps. "And when all of that blood comes out of your boyfriend's bed? Thought I'd shi—"

Heather's finger found the button that closed the divider between the front and back seats and pressed it. The Plexiglas barrier slid into place quickly. The limo driver shot her a nasty look in the rearview mirror. Probably thought she was *some* stuck-up bitch. Well, fine. Maybe today I am. Bless the fans, anyway.

"But they never should have killed off Freddy!" the driver yelled, his voice muffled by the not-quite-soundproof divider.

Listening to him had been like a sucker punch after the bell. It wasn't fair.

She sank back into the seat, trying to regain her feeling of peace, when the limo lurched to a halt. The door opened and a hand reached in and yanked her out.

"Heather? We're gonna have to run!" said a red-faced kid in his early twenties as he dragged her toward a door marked "Studio B." He wore tan Dockers, a dark, spaghetti tie over a white shirt, and a jacket that apparently came from a secondhand shop. None of it quite fit. He must be a production assistant, she thought. Or a writer.

The P.A.—Mickey he said his name was—rushed her to a makeup chair where a hideously lipsticked crone named Myrna patted Heather's face with a powder puff.

"Don't want the lights shining off your pretty face and blindin' the audience, honey," she croaked.

Then Mickey pulled her from the chair and took her to the edge of the set. She had barely settled into place when the show's host, some grinning Ken doll, whose actual name escaped Heather, introduced her. Mickey whispered a harsh "Good luck" and pushed her into the lights.

Ken doll stood as she entered and clapped his hands along with the wildly appreciative audience. Must've put some extra juice in the applause sign, Heather thought as she glued a bright smile to her face and seated herself next to the host. The applause died down, and after an effusive welcome, Ken doll began the interview.

"So, Heather, we're coming up on the tenth anniversary of the first *Nightmare on Elm Street.* It's five sequels later. Tell us how this amazing series of films has affected your life personally."

Apparently, Barbie was writing his material. Still, it was the kind of opening she had come to expect.

"I don't know if it has, really. With the exception of One and Three, I've pretty much kept out of it." Which, considering how some of the others turned out, had been a good idea. "I'm working in television now. The hours let me spend more time with my husband and little boy."

Ken doll was on her mention of a son like a piranha attacking a goldfish.

"Now that you have a child, is it possible you've decided horror is bad for children?" He leaned forward and furrowed his brow in a manner that suggested he fancied himself a hard-nosed reporter.

Heather thought a moment. Though he had asked the question for the sake of effect, there was a valid issue buried in there somewhere. "No, not really, I—" she began, but he didn't let her finish.

"Do you let *your* child watch your movies?"

"My child? No . . . but . . ." Again, he swooped in with another question before she could formulate any meaningful reply.

"What about another sequel? Is Freddy really dead?" His last question was delivered in a highly incredulous tone, as if to say, "C'mon, don't try and kid *me."*

"Of course he is," she shot back quickly. A little too quickly, perhaps. She lowered her voice to a whisper that the mikes could just pick up. "Freddy's dead and gone." The audience applauded, thinking she was mimicking her character, Nancy. But she said the words to convince herself it was true. The host forged ahead with the interview.

"And how about your costar in *Nightmare One?* Would you trust him alone with your child?"

What kind of question was that? Robert Englund was the antithesis of Freddy. He was the kindest, gentlest man she knew besides Chase. But what did that have to do with anything?

"Robert? I—" The host interrupted her with a big smile.

"Maybe we should ask *him,* hmmmm?" Whistles came from the audience. Ken doll was up to something. But what? "We've got a surprise for you, Heather. A great big surprise for you and our audience!" The crowd began to murmur excitedly. Heather shored up the smile on her face and braced herself for whatever was up Ken doll's sleeve.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he brayed like a carnival barker. "Put your hands together for the best of the bad, Ro-bert Ennn-gluunnndd!"

And out came Robert from the opposite side of the set. He was dressed in full Freddy regalia: felt hat, green and red sweater, and

work pants. He had on a facsimile of his burn makeup and waved to them good-naturedly with his clawed hand. The crowd went bonkers with applause, cheers, and whistles. And she thought they'd greeted *her* energetically. A chant grew in the audience, starting with the teenage boys, she noticed.

"Fred-dy! Fred-*dy! Fred-dy!"* Over and over again. Before it ended, a surge went through the crowd. Someone had actually started them doing "the wave." Only this time, many of the hands that flapped in the air wore plastic replicas of Freddy's glove.

Robert was center-stage as the applause died down. He struck a menacing pose and hooked his claw through the air.

"You're all my children now!" he growled, spreading his arms wide as if to draw them into a lethal embrace.

It was exactly what the audience wanted and they responded with ten times the frenzied enthusiasm of before. Ever the showman, he gave them more: slashing the air with the glove, menacing audience members, roaring some of the more memorable lines that could be broadcast on television.

The blades from Robert's glove flashed in the bright studio lights, dazzling Heather. She remembered how the glint of the Claw had caught her attention in the nightmare. Then it had attacked. But this was the old, familiar leather and metal glove, not the weird biomechanical thing of her dream. The razors on Robert's glove were fake, anyway. They probably couldn't even spread margarine. But the thought didn't ward away the specter of her nightmare.

The remainder of the show passed like a dream she could remember only in fragments. Robert finally came to sit next to her. Ken doll directed a few inane questions toward him, largely ignoring Heather except for the occasional "witty" aside.

Then it was over and Mickey the P.A. came to take her and Robert to their adjoining dressing rooms. She would have been brought here first if she had come on time. Then perhaps she wouldn't have been taken so off guard by Robert's appearance. But this must have been in the works for weeks. She'd spoken to Robert very recently and he hadn't mentioned it. She found it vaguely disturbing that his appearance had been sprung on her this way. Heather sighed to herself and looked for her purse. She hadn't realized that Mickey had taken it from her during the race from the limousine until he told her it was in the dressing room.

Heather watched Robert through the doorway between their rooms. In his front doorway, he signed autographs for a large crowd of kids.

He was in street clothes now—he dressed so elegantly in real life—and his makeup was off. Without it, he had the kind face of an everyman. His eyes were always warm and sparkling. Even so, the kids still called him Freddy. It was a credit to Robert's ability as an actor that he could pull off a character as evil as Freddy so convincingly when, truly, there seemed to be not a mean bone in his body.

She realized he was looking at her out of the corner of his eye as he signed autographs.

"You okay?" he called to her. The kids around him were so excited, they didn't notice he was dividing his attention.

"I'm fine," Heather replied tiredly.

"Everything went great, I thought." He winked. "We really got you, didn't we?"

"I don't know why you didn't tell me, that's all." She'd never been one for surprise parties, either.

Robert waved to the last of the fans and closed the door to his dressing room. He came into Heather's room, then together they walked to their waiting limousines. More fans gathered on either side of them, held back by studio security. Occasionally, someone would yell "Freddy!" or, less frequently, "Nancy!" so they'd give the crowd a smile and wave.

"Hey, they loved the expression on your face." He gestured toward the throngs of young fans. "I think they'd love to see us together again!"

"In what, a romantic comedy?"

Robert grinned devilishly. "Just because it's a romantic comedy doesn't mean it can't have a decapitation or two."

Heather laughed but his suggestion made her uneasy. She took a good look at the crowd that had come to see them. Very few of these kids were over seventeen, none over twenty. Most hadn't been much older than Dylan when the first movie came out, though she had no doubt they'd seen it on video countless times. So much for the R rating. She wondered if their parents knew what they watched. Or even had any interest in knowing. And was it a holiday or should these kids be in school? It was all out of her control. Fans were fans. But did they really want to see Nancy and Freddy again? Or just Freddy? Or just another "cool" way for someone to be killed? Had any of them even considered the question? Somehow she doubted it. And here was Robert suggesting that they team up again.

Mickey appeared suddenly, thrusting a portable telephone in her face.

"Heather? Call for you."

At first Heather regarded the phone as if he were handing her a squid. The morning's events had made her a little phone-shy. Had the psycho tracked her to the studio? Probably not—unless he was anxious to congratulate her on a fine television appearance. What would she do if it was him? How would she handle it in public, in front of Robert? One solution occurred to her: hand the phone to Robert and see if the psycho could out-Freddy the real McCoy. No, it couldn't be him, she concluded. Mickey waved the phone at her again, and she took it. After a deep breath, she pressed the talk button.

"Yes?"

"Heather?" a familiar woman's voice greeted her. Heather relaxed. "This is Sara Risher over at New Line. How *are* you?"

"Oh, hi. I'm fine, Sara. My God, a voice from the past!" And how.

"Really! Listen, Heather, I won't take but a minute of your time." Meaning many minutes, possibly an hour, but if it meant work, interesting work, it'd be okay. "It's just that we have something to propose to you and wonder if you'd stop by the offices. Bob'd love to talk to you." Bob was Robert Shaye, the CEO of New Line Cinema. He had practically built the company with Freddy Krueger's glove.

"Uh, sure. When?"

"No time like the present," Sara chirped. "The car will bring you."

"Now?" It's not like she had anything important to do, just get back to her distraught son and reconstruct her broken house. Then she remembered Jerry's comment about putting her family out on the street. That was *hardly* likely, even if she did stop working tomorrow. But if she intended to make herself unavailable to Bob and Sara, she'd have to explain. Instead, she agreed to meet with them.

Sara was pleased. "Just take a minute. You'll be glad you did, I bet."

Heather bet she wouldn't, but then, it was just her mood talking, wasn't it? Besides, she was curious.

The limo driver was terse and businesslike when she returned. The Plexiglas divider remained between them and he made no attempts at conversation. They drove to New Line in silence. Heather wished she could start the day over again. Hell with that, she'd prefer just to go home and end it already. But she had promised to meet with Bob and Sara. Still, the prospect of going home was inviting. After she made sure Dylan was all right, a nap would do her some good—if she could avoid dreaming. She remembered her earlier decision to finally see a shrink. Well, things aren't that bad, she thought. On the other hand, were things that good, or was she just procrastinating? Better just to do it. She started to pick up the phone in the limousine to call a

therapist that a friend had recommended some time ago, but thought better of it. The last thing she needed was to give the limo driver more material for the inevitable story he'd tell his friends about his Heather Langenkamp encounter.

The limousine approached a modern glass office building that looked like the mysterious obelisk from *2001: A Space Odyssey.* A bright neon sign sat on the roof, announcing NEW LINE CINEMA. The West Coast offices of the film company were housed in the top three floors of the twenty-story building. Bob Shaye's office was on the twentieth floor, of course.

After stopping at the curb in front of the building, the driver wordlessly opened the door for her. Sure do have a way with people today, she thought as she stepped out. Now all she needed to do was alienate Bob and Sara at their meeting.

Before she entered the building, she gazed up at the neon sign. Well, there was one thing that was in living color. Figures it was owned by a movie company.

The elevator let her out into a stark reception area, all glass and metal. A youngish female receptionist peered up from a polished steel crescent of a desk. Her hands fiddled with a little Koosh ball, the "nervous persons" toy that looked like a bundle of colorful rubber bands with their ends cut. She had deep, unnaturally copper-colored hair that was pulled tautly away from her face and tied in back. Her wardrobe was reconstituted Melrose gypsy, a contrast to the ultramodern surroundings. As Heather approached, she noticed that the woman's thick lips, made more prominent by dark purple lipstick, were moving. She was talking to herself in a full speaking voice. But then Heather noticed the faraway focus of the receptionist's eyes—and the hands-free headset sticking out of one ear. She was on the phone.

At first the receptionist seemed not to notice Heather. Finally, her eyes focused and she looked up, a little annoyed. She breathed, "Hold on," into the phone, and asked, "Help you?" And this better be good, her eyes said.

"I'm here to see Bob Shaye."

The receptionist's eyes crawled up and down Heather.

"Was Bob expecting you?" She emphasized his name as if they were intimates.

Heather sighed. Why was the whole world being so difficult today? Sleep, dreamless sleep, that's all she wanted. As she drew a breath to begin explaining, a voice called out from behind her.

“Heather!” She turned to see Sara emerging from a door elsewhere in the lobby, barreling toward her with the energy and enthusiasm of a Labrador retriever. But while Labs were dumb, happy dogs, Sara’s effusiveness sometimes masked the fact that she was a shrewd, successful film producer. She enveloped Heather in a mighty hug, then held her at arm’s length to get a good look at her.

“Bob’s dying to see you,” she said, hooking Heather’s arm with her own and leading her past the receptionist. They navigated through a warren of uniformly beige cubicles. Even the personal decorations put up by their occupants barely distinguished one from the next. Sara dragged Heather—being dragged was another recurring element in her day—past a conference room, where she glimpsed a group of people hovering over proposed marketing campaigns for a new movie. A man crossed their path. Sara lunged forward and caught him by the elbow.

“Heather, this is Mike DeLuca. Mike, Heather Langenkamp. Our little Nancy’s come back home!” she beamed.

Michael was a President of New Line and a new-Hollywood mover. He matched Sara’s exuberance and grabbed Heather’s hand, giving it a vigorous shake. “Hey! I’m a fan!” Bless you, then, thought Heather. “Great meeting you.” Before she could utter a sound, he ducked into a nearby office, gave a high five to its occupant, and closed the door. Heather noticed he had never actually broken his stride to meet her.

Sara began towing her again and they soon reached their destination: a huge stainless-steel door. Bob Shaye’s name was etched on its surface.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Sara asked.

“Coffee’d be nice.” Sara turned to one of Bob’s assistants, a pale-faced girl who sat at a desk to the left of the big door.

“Sounds good,” Sara said quickly, her enthusiastic tone taking an odd shading. Then it was gone and she just sounded like the usual, cheerful Sara. “Kim, would you get Heather and me a coffee?” she asked, then turned to Heather. “How you like it, hon?”

“Black’s fine.”

Kim rose from her filing to fetch the coffee from the break room.

Sara knocked twice on the door and pushed it open. They entered a spacious corner office that was almost all window and featured a terrace that commanded a view out to the sea. Bob Shaye stood on the terrace, a portable phone pressed to his ear. He waved Heather forward.

Sara’s duty completed, she watched Heather from the doorway. Word

had gotten to her about Heather nearly backing out of *AM/LA* this morning. That would have been a disaster, bar none. They'd arranged the surprise appearance by Robert as much for Heather's sake as for the overall P.R. value. It had been meant to loosen the actress up, prepare her for the meeting they were about to have. She shuddered to think about what would have happened if Heather had canceled. To Sara, show business was all about rhythm, and Heather backing out of that appearance would have tripped up the dancers.

When she saw Heather in the lobby, Sara had noticed the dark circles under the younger woman's eyes. Except for that feature, she thought Heather had retained all the youth and beauty she'd had when they first met almost ten years ago during the filming of *A Nightmare on Elm Street.* Sara sighed. Heather was pretty in a way that didn't need a lot of help from makeup. At Sara's age, she wasn't quite that lucky. But there were benefits. The makeup she wore hid the dark circles that had recently formed under her own eyes.

Heather heard the door close behind her. Sara had left. A large Warhol painting of Freddy Krueger dominated the wall behind Bob's desk. It almost distracted her from the realization that his desk held no papers, scripts, or other clutter. Now, that's power, Heather thought when her focus shifted. This man ran a successful film company *and* kept a clean desk. Not bad.

"I gotta go," Bob was saying into the phone as he came in from the terrace. "Call me when you get to Milan. And don't forget the *risotto con tartufi. Fantastico!"* He kissed his fingers in a stock Italian gesture. "Have fun," he finished, folded the phone and laid it on his desk. If he had been anyone else, Heather would have guessed Bob had picked up the phone when he heard the knock and was speaking to a dial tone. Some executives went to absurd lengths to make sure everyone knew how important they were. But Bob didn't need to falsify conversations to emphasize his stature. The *risotto con tartufi* probably *was* to die for.

Bob met her in the middle of the room. He clasped Heather's hands in his own and shook, favoring her with an overly earnest smile.

"Great seeing you, Heather. How you doing?"

"Fine. I don't have to ask how you're doing." The bare desk said it all. Bob smiled humbly, admitting that things were indeed just dandy.

"So far so good. Maybe we can send a little your way, too, if you're up for it." He motioned them toward an Italian leather couch. Before it sat an immaculate glass coffee table. Its surface was unmarred by fingerprints, cup rings, or the slightest imperfection of any kind. Then Kim arrived and set down two cups of coffee on it without using coasters. Bob didn't even flinch. Probably had someone polish the

glass every hour or so. This really was a rarefied atmosphere.

As she settled into the couch, Bob took a seat across from her in an oversize leather chair. Both immediately picked up their cups and drank. Heather didn't notice the strange way he peered over the rim of his cup as he sipped. By the time she looked up, Bob was chewing on his thumb thoughtfully, carefully considering how to run this play. He picked straight up the middle.

"I'll cut to the chase, Heather. You interested in making the definitive *Nightmare* with us?"

Heather almost choked on her coffee.

"I thought you'd killed Freddy off," she said, knowing that fact tended to be irrelevant in the movie business.

"We did. Bad mistake. The fans are clamoring for more. So, Evil never dies, right?" He smiled, digging the concept. But she thought the smile seemed a little strained. "Anyway, a while back we got a call from Wes. He's got this idea. And who better to resurrect Freddy than his creator?"

"I thought he'd stopped doing horror." Wes himself once claimed to have peaked with the first *Elm Street,* that there was nothing else in the realm of horror that was important to say. His involvement in *Nightmare Three,* as well as her own, had been at the studio's insistence. Begging, really. They needed to pump new life into the old cash cow after a seemingly botched operation, the first sequel. Wes had agreed because he needed to regroup after a misstep of his own. Since then, he'd focused on a more personal type of film, the kind that marked the progression to the inevitable "important" film that was all the rage among former "bad boy" filmmakers.

"Believe it or not"—Bob laughed, nervously it seemed—"he told me I hadn't heard from him in ten years because he hasn't had any good nightmares." He sounded as if was relaying an amusing story that he didn't particularly believe. "They're his inspiration. But now he's saying he's got a new script in the works."

"Which means he's having nightmares again?" Heather asked. The fearful voice started murmuring inside. She noticed Bob was biting his thumbnail again, but absently this time. He ignored her question entirely.

"He's very excited about it."

"The nightmares?" she asked.

"He's excited about the script." He answered quickly, a note of frustration in his voice. "You should be, too. It stars you."

This surprised Heather more than their desire to make another sequel. Freddy killed Nancy at the end of the third movie. She just

couldn't see a satisfactory way to resurrect the character. Or even a good reason to do so. But if Wes was working on a script . . .

"Can I read it?"

A shadow passed over Bob's face and was quickly gone. "He's not showing it until it's done. But it sounds hot, and we wanted to get all our stars lined up in case it is." As he continued, the shadow returned and he watched carefully, gauging her response. "You and Robert rated great today, which is the first thing we needed to know—"

She realized now the talk show and Robert's appearance had been a setup. His comment about the fans wanting to see them together again had not been an idle suggestion.

"You mean that was a . . ."

"Sort of a trial balloon."

Heather looked down into her coffee. Like nearly everything else today, this felt terribly wrong. She looked up at Bob to find him watching her intensely.

"I don't know, Bob," she started slowly, "I'm flattered and all, but I've got a kid now. I don't know about horror."

"So?" He was being very direct. She could tell this was important to him. But she had no intention of rushing to a decision.

"So I don't know about horror."

"Come on. Kids *love* horror." Bob was not going to take no for an answer. And it was obvious he wasn't really listening to her. The only word he would hear from her was "yes." But she wouldn't say it. Not here. Not now. And maybe never. She tried to stall.

"And I . . . I've got other things happening." It was a stupid thing to say, really. There was nothing that would prevent her from doing what would probably be a very high-profile movie. But what was she going to say? That she couldn't do it because she was having trouble sleeping? Hardly.

Bob was ready to deal. "I'm sure we can match any offer."

Heather stood. She needed air. Badly.

"It's not that—I've got a fan—"

Bob also stood, and cut her off.

"Sweetie, you've got *lots* of fans. We've done market studies. You rate right up there."

The room was closing in. She had to get out. Now. Suddenly, Bob had his arm around her and was leading her to the door.

"We've already got Chase working on a prototype for the new glove."

Heather stopped abruptly and faced Bob.

“What?” He looked away from her stare, slightly ashamed.

“I know,” he said, wincing. “We asked him to keep it kind of a surprise until we talked.” Then he pointedly changed the subject. Apparently, he felt it was something she would have to work out with her husband. “Look, how about we get in touch with your agent. You still with Jerry?”

As if he didn’t know.

“Yeah, but—” she began, but for Bob the meeting was over.

“We’ll work something out. I’m sure you’ll be happy with it.”

Apparently, Bob thought this was a done deal. She must have missed that part of the meeting. But for her, nothing had been decided. And nothing would be decided until she had a talk with Chase. How could he hide something like this from her? But more than his deceit was affecting her. Very specifically, the prospect of making this movie scared the hell out of her. And she didn’t know why. Then her mind returned to what Bob had said earlier, about Wes and his nightmares. She stopped in the doorway.

“Bob, how long has Wes been working on this script?” Somehow this was important information, but its significance hung just outside the edge of her comprehension. Bob looked at her puzzled, and then shrugged.

“I don’t know. Several months. Why?” he asked blithely. But Heather was suddenly aware he had closed up on her. He was hiding something.

“And since you’ve been thinking of making it, has anything funny happened?”

“I don’t follow.” But he did follow. She could tell.

“Like weird calls, by any chance?” The intensity of Heather’s stare kept him from looking away from her. She wanted an explanation for his behavior today. A theory had taken shape in her mind.

The phone on Bob’s desk rang. He didn’t make a move to pick it up. He just kept staring at her. Heather thought she saw fear creep into his eyes.

“Or nightmares?”

The phone kept ringing. And ringing.

“Why don’t you pick up your phone, Bob?” She was daring him now. It was clear to her what was going on. The psycho, the psuedo-Freddy, had been calling Bob, too. And maybe it was giving him nightmares. He was afraid, just like she was. She suddenly had a cruel desire to see his reaction to the sound of roaring furnaces. But Bob played this one cool and merely shrugged.

“That’s what people get paid for around here.”

The phone stopped mid-ring and Kim's voice soon emanated from a hidden speaker.

"It's Ted in New York. He wants to know how the glove is coming."

Heather blinked twice, slowly, her mind in a dense fog. Bob's executive façade returned in full force.

"Gotta take that. Keep in touch." He tore himself away and returned to his desk.

Heather muttered, "You too, Bob," but he was too far away to hear. As she stumbled out of the room, Kim zoomed past with a cup of coffee and went into Bob's office. Heather steadied herself for a moment and looked out into the maze of cubicles. She had no idea where the lobby was so she just picked a direction and started walking. In her daze, she inadvertently gave herself a tour of nearly the entire floor, encountering several dead ends along the way. Finally, someone pointed out the exit. As the elevator took her down, she realized something strange about the offices above. On every desk sat a cup of steaming coffee.

Bob Shaye sat at his desk with a fresh cup of coffee and his eyes closed. He was breathing deeply. He had prepared for a tough meeting but hadn't planned on being the one who made it difficult. It had been hard enough to get Heather to agree to the appearance in honor of the movie's tenth anniversary. If she'd known in advanced that Robert was going to be there, she might have refused. Her agent, Jerry, had told them that. So they arranged the surprise with the hope she would remember what a wonderful movie it had been, and what a great experience she'd had making it. Then she'd be excited about the prospect of doing it all again. As it was, they'd almost lost her because of the earthquake this morning. As a result, he had prepared to be delicate with Heather. However, mentioning that her husband was hiding something from her was hardly a delicate maneuver.

At least she said she'd think about doing the movie. Opening his eyes, he stared at the coffee table over which they'd had their discussion. He was trying to reconstruct the scene. *Had* she agreed to think about the film? Or was he just imagining what he hoped he remembered? He was so tired these days, his thinking was often confused. Bob definitely remembered mentioning Wes and his nightmares. Even though it was necessary information, telling Heather had been a big mistake. It obviously set her off. Anyway, Bob didn't want to talk about nightmares. Anyone's nightmares. And he had interrupted her when she began to talk about her "fan" for a reason. He knew quite well what she really meant to say. But no use bringing up that nasty business. Ac-*cen*-tuate the positive, as the song goes. And

there was positive here, somewhere. And as soon as his mind cleared, it would come to him.

In the meantime, his phone was still blinking. Ted from New York had not gone away. I gotta snap out of this, Bob thought, and drank half the cup of coffee before he picked up the phone.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
May 18, 1994

Very cranky today. Writing all the time. Not getting a lot of sleep. Then they tell me the script's changed and I have to wait to be faxed the new pages. Everything I've written so far may need a major overhaul.

What? Are they making it up as they go along?

Yes. Very cranky today.

Still, no one'll hear *me* complaining. This opportunity is too important for that. First chances are always the hardest to get and I intend to make the most of this one. That means no whining about missing pages, script changes, turnaround time, or anything else. I don't want anyone thinking they made a mistake in hiring me. When it's over, I want someone to pat me on the head and say, "What a good little writer you've been." And throw me another bone.

Meantime, the dreams are getting a little out of hand, even for me. What little sleep I do get is filled with them, one right after another. And pretty harsh stuff, too. But pretty interesting. I've started writing down as many and as much of the dreams as I can remember. If things keep up, maybe my next book will be a collection entitled, *Dave's High-Octane Nightmares.*

Here's one from last night I'd use:

I was in a bar. The smoke irritated eyes, and a slight itch developed in the corner of my right eye. So I scratched. It felt good. Sometimes there's nothing better than a good scratch. But, instead of going away, the itch grew. I scratched harder, using all four fingers. The itch only got worse. My jagged fingernails started to raise red welts on my skin. Soon the irritation retreated into the eye itself. With increasingly furious scratching, I tore off my

eyelid and dug into my eyeball. Like a parasite, the itch burrowed deeper into my head. My desperate fingers followed. Soon I gouged out the entire eyeball and flung it into my date's drink with a plop. Snapping off bits of bone around the empty socket, I enlarged the hole so I could reach in and claw at the inside of my skull. Handfuls of flesh, bone, and brain splattered onto the bartop.

I awoke suddenly in total darkness, convinced I was blind. After some good old-fashioned thrashing about, my eyes adjusted to the night. Still, I rushed to the bathroom to make sure my face was still a face and not a bloody hole. No gruesome Halloween mask stared back from the mirror, only a pale, frightened me with half a night's worth of stubble on his chin. But it took me until dawn to fall back to sleep again.

Twisted, huh? Well, maybe the waking-up part wasn't quite as dramatic, but you better believe I didn't get much sleep after that little doozy. There's one good thing about it, though: at least in the dream I had a *date.*

3

The limo driver was watching her again. Their eyes met in the rearview mirror and he looked away quickly. As soon as she stumbled out of the New Line building, the insolence in his expression had vanished. Now he seemed genuinely worried about her. Probably thinks I'm crazy, Heather thought darkly. Well, he can join the club.

It seemed likely that Bob Shaye was having doubts about her sanity. Who else but a crazy person wouldn't jump at the chance to be in a new *Elm Street* movie? And if that wasn't enough, she had exhibited an obsession for nightmares and telephones. He wasn't hiding anything—except possibly his disappointment with her reaction to the proposition. If he had seemed afraid of anything, it had no doubt been that she might start foaming at the mouth. As for all the coffee—the way that office ran, it would have been a shock to see any less of the stuff.

It had taken several minutes for the paranoia to wear off. Very little lingered. Only embarrassment was left—and disappointment. Heather had to admit it: all along she'd secretly hoped that someone else was suffering as she had been. Just hearing about one phone call would have changed everything. It would have meant that she wasn't alone. But she *was* alone. The psuedo-Freddy had been very careful to make her his only target. His tone, however deranged, was intimate. No one else had ever picked up a ringing phone and found him there, either by accident or by intention. And both Chase and the police had tried. For a while, it seemed like a solution: always have somebody else answer the phone. But she resented feeling like a prisoner in her own home, so she didn't stick with it. And he invariably caught her.

Heather supposed that news of Wes's nightmares had punched her buttons. Even if they weren't having the same dreams—the conclusion her mind leaped to the moment Bob brought up the subject—Wes would still be the best person to talk to. But approaching him with her problems might be a gross imposition. He wasn't a psychologist, after all. So there she was, alone again.

Whatever was happening to her, the damage with Bob was done. Acting like a lunatic was not the most graceful way of declining a generous offer. Besides, she hadn't fully made up her mind about the new movie. Wes's participation was a big draw. His presence guaranteed a level of depth and quality that she thought was missing in the more recent *Elm Streets.* Also, the thing might actually be scary.

Freddy sure wasn't as menacing as he used to be. Now he was more like a Henny Youngman with a claw. "Kill my wife, please!" Nothing wrong with a good laugh, of course, but Freddy's bon vivant attitude tended to trivialize the violent acts he committed.

Earlier, the talk show host asked if she thought horror was bad for children. It didn't necessarily have to be. Many children's stories had violent undercurrents, but the boundaries between good and evil in them were clear. But she was becoming more and more uncomfortable with the blurry morality of some youth-oriented entertainment. She didn't think it was quite the root of society's ills, but perhaps a flower that could bear dangerous seeds.

Heather shook her head, trying to stop her brain from continuing to rev at high gear while her thoughts led nowhere. This was typical of how her mind worked when she was exhausted. And hungry. It occurred to her she hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. The idea of taking a warm bath when she got home—after she checked on Dylan—crossed her mind. Baths always relaxed her. She just had to make sure she didn't fall asleep in the tub.

The limo pulled up in front of Heather's house. As she stepped out onto the curb, she thanked the limo driver, who had not said a word the entire ride home. Surprisingly, he gave her a warm smile before he drove away.

Halfway up the walk, the screaming started. From inside her house.

Bolting to the front door, she threw it open. The shrieks were coming from upstairs. She raced up the steps, taking them two at a time. As Heather entered Dylan's room, Julie looked up from beside his bed, her face frozen in panic. She was trying to hold onto Dylan, who was thrashing violently, tangled in the covers. In his fury, he almost threw Julie away from him. As Heather started forward, Dylan began screaming again, the sound alone driving her back.

The horrendous, gut-wrenching wail seemed impossibly loud. It was the cry of someone being slowly and cruelly murdered. And somehow it was coming from her son. His eyelids were wide open, yet only the whites showed. The wail tapered off and changed into a mumbling that grew steadily louder. Soon, words could be made out, but the language that spawned them was alien. Heather stooped down to help Julie, but froze when Dylan roared again, this time in English.

"Never sleep again, never sleep again!" he bellowed in a deep, inhuman voice. Then his back arched, practically folding him in half. One arm struck Julie in the chest and she fell away from him. Then he was himself again, a broken little boy, sobbing uncontrollably.

Heather looked down at Julie, who sat with her arms wrapped tightly around her.

"What's going on? Was he watching the movie on TV again?"

Julie had no idea what she was talking about. "Movie? He hasn't been watching TV at all. He was taking his nap when I heard screaming—" She couldn't go on. Her eyes closed in an attempt to block out the memory of the horrible sound.

Heather went to the bed and kneeled down beside Dylan. He lay on his side, curled up in a fetal position. His sobbing was starting to taper off and his eyes were those of a frightened animal.

"Rex saved me," he said through the tears.

"Rex? Who's Rex?"

Dylan lifted the covers and reached in the direction of a lump underneath them. He pulled it out and handed her a plush dinosaur toy. She took it, and Rex nearly disintegrated in her hands. Stuffing leaked out of four deep gashes in the dinosaur's body. Looking at the gashes, Heather felt as though someone had punched her in the stomach.

"Is Rex gonna die?" asked Dylan hopelessly.

"No, Rex is not going to die," she said, realizing that Dylan was probably seeing the horror on her face. She tried not to think about how Rex could have gotten those cuts. Right now Dylan needed taking care of—and fixing Rex was the best way to do that. "Julie," she said, turning. "You know where the sewing stuff is, don't you?"

"Sure." Julie had reverted to her cheerful self for Dylan's benefit. Her smile wavered and she grunted as she stood. Chances were good she would have a bruise on her sternum where Dylan had struck her. By the time she made it to her feet, the smile had won out. She pinched Dylan on the nose and said, "We'll do an operation. Dr. Dylan and Dr. Julie. We'll fix him up, good as new!" She took the dinosaur from Heather and lifted Dylan out of bed. Together they marched down to the kitchen to start the healing process.

For a long time after, Heather just stared at Dylan's bed. A fluttering caught her eye. A wispy strand of dinosaur stuffing had stuck to her blouse. She pulled it off and shuddered. It felt like blood on her fingers.

She ran downstairs to the phone.

After a series of misdirections, Heather was finally connected to Chase at his special-effects trailer in Palmdale. He had been in the middle of trying to froth bubbles for the commercial in just the right way when his cellular phone warbled.

"What's up?" he yawned. He'd been frothing off and on for quite some time and was exhausted. In between, he tinkered with the Claw, but he wasn't going to tell Heather that. Not yet, at least.

"Chase, you'd better come home." Her voice was so controlled he didn't sense her panic at first.

"Heather, I'm stuck here. Neither Chuck nor Terry came in today." The word "bastards" shot briefly through his mind. "I can't get away."

"Chase—it's Dylan." He heard it now. She was just speaking low because Dylan must be nearby. He stood, the frothing lethargy instantly dissipating.

"What?"

"He's had some sort of . . . episode." She was very close to crying now.

"What? What kind of episode?" Chase tried to remain calm, If he lost it, she wouldn't be able to tell him anything. And what she had to say was very important to him.

"He was acting very strange. He thinks somebody's after him, Chase. It's scary. It scared me. He was acting like . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Like what?" he insisted. She was silent for a moment. Then her voice returned, but weakly.

"Like Freddy."

Chase had expected that answer. Unfortunately. So he asked another question to which he knew the answer.

"Heather, has there been another call?"

She hesitated, not wanting to tell him.

"Chase. Why didn't Chuck or Terry show up?" she asked instead.

He didn't know. Phone calls had gone unanswered and unreturned. Pretty soon he'd be worried about them. But that was later.

"Forget those clowns, Heather. Answer me. Did you get a call from that guy or not?"

She went silent again, and he waited patiently. Finally, she answered.

"Yes." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"I'll be there in three hours," he said immediately.

"Don't speed, Chase. It's not—"

He hung up. There was no point in discussing the matter any further until he reached home.

Chase took the portable phone and flew to his pickup truck. He pulled away seconds later. He'd call the production company from the road. And maybe he'd give Terry and Chuck another try as well. If he

could reach either of them, they could finish up the job and take care of the Claw, which he left in the trailer.

The dial tone whirred in her ears a few seconds before she hung up the phone. She considered calling him back. Knowing Chase, he was already on the freeway. It was out of her hands now. She hoped there wouldn't be another episode before he got home. Even with Julie there, she didn't know if she could handle it.

Heather looked into the kitchen but didn't go in. Dr. Julie stitched up Rex while Dr. Dylan looked on hopefully. He looked like a normal little kid again. Except for a dim glow of fear that remained in his eyes.

* * *

A short time later, Heather ordered a pizza to be delivered. Julie stayed long enough to share it with them. After patching up Rex, she told Heather how helpless she had felt when Dylan had started screaming. If Heather hadn't come home when she did, Julie didn't know what she would have done. When it was time for her to leave, Julie seemed relieved when Dylan didn't beg her to stay. His episode had taken a lot out of her. She just kissed them both and left.

Night soon descended and a peaceful quiet enveloped the house. Bedtime for Dylan. At first he was difficult. He wanted to stay up until Chase returned home. Heather overruled him. Dylan obviously needed a good night's rest. However, it seemed to be the last thing he wanted. Eventually, they struck a deal: he'd go quietly if she read him a bedtime story. That settled, she marched him up to his room and tucked him in bed.

The first book she pulled from the shelf was *Frog and Toad Are Friends,* by Arnold Lobel. It was the kind of pleasant story that she thought might smooth away the last wrinkles of the day. Dylan wouldn't have it. He insisted on the fable of Hansel and Gretel. She was about to refuse—she wasn't in the mood for a dark, Germanic tale tonight—but he threatened to become difficult again, so she relented. The day had worn her out as well. At least the story has a happy ending, she thought. So she made the room cozy by turning off all but the light beside his bed, pulled up a chair, and began to read, giving each character a different voice. Dylan was so engrossed by the tale that he didn't make a sound the entire time.

"As soon as the sun was up, the witch made Gretel fetch the wood and kindle a fire," Heather read as the story wound down. " 'We will bake the cookies first,' she said. 'I have heated the dough. Crawl in

and see if the fire is blazing high enough now.’ And she pushed Gretel toward the oven. The witch meant to shut the door and bake *her* once she was inside.” Heather made a face and put the book down. This wasn’t how she wanted to send her son into dreamland. “Dylan, this is too violent. I don’t know why you like these stupid old fairy tales.”

Dylan wiggled his feet impatiently and merely commanded, “Finish, please!”

“This is going to give you nightmares.”

His feet wiggled again, faster, and he looked up at her. “I like this story.” And he wouldn’t look away until she gave in. Heather sighed and picked up the book.

“But Gretel guessed what the witch was planning. ‘I don’t know how to get in,’ Gretel said. ‘How am I supposed to manage it?’ ” Good work, Gretel. Play dumb. “ ‘Stupid girl!’ shouted the witch, rushing up to the oven. ‘The opening is big enough. See, I can fit myself.’ Then quickly Gretel came behind and pushed with all her might—plunging the wicked old woman headlong into the flames, banging the door shut and bolting it tight. The witch howled.” No, this was too much howling for one day. She closed the book. “That’s enough.”

Heather turned, prepared for Dylan to protest again. Instead, he was sitting bolt upright in bed, his expression trancelike as he stared toward his window.

“The witch howled like a scalded cat,” he recited. “But Gretel ran away and left her there to perish nonetheless.”

She opened the book again. He had picked up the story right where she had left off. The words he spoke were exactly those printed on the page. She turned to ask him how he knew, but he was staring at her now. His eyes glittered in the lamplight.

“She ran to her brother as fast as she could and flung open the door. ‘Hansel! Hansel!’ she cried. ‘We are saved—the witch is dead!’ ” He blinked, the trance fading.

Heather could only think of one thing to say. “Time for sleep.” But he still wasn’t ready.

“Say how they find their way back home.”

No more. It was time for bed. For both of us. “Tomorrow night,” she said, turning out the light.

“No. Tonight. It’s important!” He tugged on her sleeve. Pale blue moonlight lit his pleading face. But there was no fear there and she had to laugh.

“Dylan, you know as well as I do.” Probably better, considering your uncanny recitation. “They follow the trail of bread crumbs back to their house.”

“Then their father covered them with kisses and they were safe,” he finished with a satisfied smile.

“They were safe and could sleep,” Heather added. It seemed important to emphasize the sleep part. Dylan sank back into bed contentedly. Tucking him in, she noticed a lump under the covers near his feet. She patted it, wondering what it could be.

“Rex,” Dylan answered her look. He took a flashlight that sat beside his bed and lifted the comforter. Poking his head underneath, he motioned for her to follow. Curiouser and curiouser, she thought, and joined him under the covers.

The comforter became a colorful tent around them. Dylan pointed the flashlight’s beam toward the foot of the bed. There lay Rex on his side, his back toward them. The stitching bowed him slightly in the middle.

“Rex keeps him from coming up,” Dylan told her very seriously.

“Who?”

“The mean man with the claws.” Heather caught her breath for the millionth time that day. Dylan didn’t notice her gaping and continued in the matter-of-fact way little kids explain their world to noncomprehending adults. “He wants to come up from down there,” he said, pointing beyond Rex, “while we sleep. I keep my feet up here.” He indicated the “safe” area above Rex. “Rex keeps him down there. He’s my guard.” He turned back to her, solemn. “You should have a guard, too.”

Wherever did he get that idea? Heather suddenly became light-headed.

“Dylan, there’s nothing down there.” Her voice was rising in panic. “Look.” She lifted the blankets past Rex, revealing the bottom edge of the bed and floor beyond. “See?” He had to see. It was important for both of them.

Dylan regarded the reality of the bed and floor for a long moment. Then he shrugged and said simply, “It’s different when you’re gone,” and turned off the flashlight.

Outside the blankets, Heather tucked Dylan in for what she hoped would be the last time that night. He looked wide awake but didn’t ask to stay up any longer. She clicked off the small night-light next to his bed.

“On, please?” he asked. The moonlight didn’t seem as bright as before.

“Okay, sweetie,” she said, switching the light back on. “Night, night, sleep tight,” and then he joined her for the “Don’t let the bedbugs bite” finale.

She kissed him and went to the door. Before she could leave, Dylan stopped her.

"Daddy coming home?"

"He's on his way."

"He can follow the bread crumbs, right?"

"Right." And when he returns, he'll cover us with kisses and we'll be safe, she thought. Then she left, closing the door behind her.

"If the birds don't eat them first," Dylan said quietly to himself as he stared out the window. He was hoping not to fall asleep too quickly tonight. Rex was still weak from this afternoon's battle.

The cracked bedroom mirror was showing some ugly truths again, so Heather turned away from it. Headlights showed on the street outside the house, and she ran to the window. A Honda putted by. Telling herself that Chase wasn't due home for at least another hour didn't keep her from feeling disappointed. She needed him now. Dylan needed him, too.

Heather went down to the living room and sat on the couch with a cup of coffee, intending to wait up. She might as well. Sleep seemed unlikely under the circumstances. Her mind revved into overdrive again. An old worry had come out into the light earlier and had been growing all day. The worry that maybe she wasn't well. She recognized her weak resolution to call a therapist as a form of denial. Deep down, she suspected that there was more wrong with her than could be solved by an hour-long chat. It seemed that the convergence of events—the nightmares, the earthquake, the calls, and even the possibility of making another *Elm Street*—was overloading a mind predisposed to instability.

The tears came almost as soon as the thought. Because there it was, out in the open now. I might be having a breakdown, she thought bitterly. And maybe I'm the last to know. Chase probably suspected. Julie practically said it this afternoon. Heather's grandmother had been insane, no doubt about that. Her mother hadn't been crazy per se, but as she grew older she became more . . . difficult, and developed Alzheimer's relatively early. As a teenager and young adult, just the possibility of having inherited mental illness had almost driven her crazy. Then one day she folded up the fear and tucked it the back pocket of her mind. But she wasn't only worried for herself. Her worry was for Dylan. He seemed to be having a problem himself. And in her condition, she felt incapable of helping him. And she was responsible for whatever was wrong.

But Chase could do something. He could help them both.

Without realizing it, Heather's spinning thoughts whirled her into sleep.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
May 21, 1994

This project is really starting to get to me. Freddy Krueger is now a frequent flier in my dream plane. I should be honored by his “presence” but to tell the truth, I just wish he’d wait ’til I’m done with the book. He’s making it hard to write, I wake up so exhausted.

The dream goes something like this:

He chases me through the boiler room—I remember it from the movies—all burned up, swinging his claw. He doesn’t quite reach me, but he never stops coming after me. His awful laugh is everywhere. At first it’s not so bad. But it’s a long dream. When I finally do wake up, I feel like I’ve run a three-minute mile.

If he came up with a one-liner every once in a while, y’know, just to break the tension, I wouldn’t mind the dream at all. Thing is, he doesn’t say anything funny. And it makes me feel like nightmares did when I was a kid, before “scary” became a hobby of mine—

It makes me feel afraid.

* * *

The moon lit up the desert on either side of the two-lane highway. Except for the low vegetation and the occasional cactus, there wasn't much to see. Chase wasn't looking, anyway. His eyes were locked on the road ahead. With low expectations, he picked up the portable phone beside him and pressed the talk button. Static squealed out of the earpiece. He swore to himself and threw it on the seat beside him. A car approached without dimming its brights. Its high-intensity beams nearly blinded him. He squinted against the light, unconsciously suppressing a yawn. The car passed, and after a few moments he could see again.

Heather's call had shaken him deeply. He had never told her about his own nightmares. She had enough problems without having to know that. Besides, he only remembered snatches of his dreams, never the whole thing, as Heather apparently did. But he knew the nightmares were strange and left him with an overwhelming feeling of danger. Another item Heather didn't need to know. She relied so much on his strength at times. Knowing he was afraid would have pulled the rug right out from under her.

The white lines of the road riveted him as they strobed hypnotically past. He shook his head and yawned. God, am I tired, he thought. If he could get something on the radio . . . but, as he discovered with the phone, he was in the middle of nowhere. Only static blasted out of the speakers. He pressed the seek button, but the tuner zoomed up the dial, not locking onto any signals. About a hundred stations whizzed by, each playing a different kind of static. The numbers started at the bottom of the dial again and finally stopped. They blinked, indicating a weak signal. The faint sound of a news report fought with the crackling.

". . . tectonic nightmare . . . fault line hitherto unknown seems to be spread . . ." A blast of static overcame the voice. It returned, but Chase could only make out a few more words, ". . . so extensive that . . ." before it faded away completely. He shut off the radio. The only remaining sounds were the wind whining past the car and the *ploc ploc ploc* of his tires over expansion joints.

His mind returned to Heather—and Dylan. Whatever was happening involved his son now. Perhaps it had been wrong of him not to tell Heather about his nightmares. This morning the cut on his hand had mystified him. It probably happened as he said, on the picture glass, but he wasn't certain. He'd been having a nightmare as well. And in it, he thought he remembered cutting his hand, but he didn't remember how. Even now he could feel the nightmare's pull.

With a start he fealized he'd been dozing. The car had begun to drift onto the other side of the road. He violently shook his head and jerked the steering wheel, returning the car to the proper lane. That was almost very bad.

He reached down and scratched his leg. His muscles were sore from sitting in the car for over two hours. Then he tried another tack to stay awake. He began to sing.

"This is meee . . . losing myy religion . . ." It sounded awful, but then, who was around to hear? "Look at mee—losing myy religion . . ."

Focused on the road and singing, Chase didn't hear the tiny ripping noise coming from the seat between his legs. Nor did he spy four tiny steel points poking through the fabric there. Soon they grew into four long claws. But he didn't see.

After repeating the same two lines several times, he realized it was all he knew of that particular song and stopped singing. More than his aching muscles was making him uncomfortable now. With a quick grab, he readjusted his private parts, which had felt as tightly packed as sardines in his jeans. He barely missed cutting his fingers on razors down there, but the blades swerved out of the way. It wasn't time.

Deep breaths were in order now. He knew he should have stopped for some coffee, but it was too late. There would be no place to stop until he was almost home. He lightly slapped his face to get the blood moving and noticed a torn piece of upholstery clinging to one finger. Barely giving it a second thought, he flicked it away.

He was nodding now, unaware how tired he really was. The day had been long and exhausting. Maybe he and Heather would talk in the morning. Right now the plan was to hit the sack as soon as he got home.

Four moonlit blades glinted near Chase's shoulder. Four long, thin shadows fell across his neck. But he didn't notice. Chase's eyes closed and his head fell limply forward. He had fallen asleep.

The Claw struck then. It leaped, burying the blades deep into his chest, pulling down with inhuman force. Chase's scream became a gurgle as his shredded lungs filled with blood.

The truck driver saw the oncoming headlights. When they jerked to the left and crossed into his lane, he said a prayer. There was nothing he could do to avoid the collision.

Heather awoke suddenly on the couch. Her arms jerked upward reflexively, almost upsetting the coffee cup on the table next to her. The room became quiet suddenly, and she realized she had been

screaming. She looked around. On the stairs sat Dylan, watching her.

"Mommy scared?" he asked.

She was still disoriented. But, yeah, she was scared, though she had no intention of admitting that to Dylan.

"Mommy's fine, Dylan. Just had a bad dream." She couldn't remember it. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"Rex woke up. He was fighting."

Before Heather could respond to Dylan, the doorbell rang. Who the hell? she thought.

"Dylan, you go back to sleep now," she told him on her way to the door.

"Not sleepy." He wasn't talking back, but he didn't want to go upstairs.

Heather peered through the eyehole in the door. Two highway patrolmen stood outside. Heather's stomach turned inside out.

"Dylan," she said, trying to keep herself under control. "Go to bed. I mean it." He caught the panicked note in her voice and went up to his room.

As soon as Dylan was out of sight, the shaking started. Her body quaked violently with the fear that comes when it's late at night and two policemen are standing on the front doorstep. Chase hadn't returned. At first all she could do was claw at the slide bolt. Finally, the door swung open. Two very grave faces greeted her.

"Heather Langenkamp?" said one officer.

"Yes?"

"Is Chase Porter your husband?" His use of the present tense seemed forced and unnatural. The look on his face said he was extremely uncomfortable with what he had to tell her.

"Yes." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"I'm afraid there was an accident. It appears he fell asleep while driving, ma'am."

Black dots swarmed in her vision. She had to lean her hand against the wall to steady herself.

"Is he . . . I mean, was he hurt?"

"I'm afraid it's worse than that, ma'am."

The ground tilted at an odd angle, Heather thought. Apparently, only she noticed, because the patrolmen didn't move. One did . . . he leaned slightly forward to catch her in case she collapsed.

"Is he dead?" Why did she have to ask? Couldn't they have just come out with it? Heather realized the fearful voice was her only remaining inner voice.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Are you sure it’s him? I—”

The second patrolman interrupted her gently. “We have his effects. You can confirm from that.” And he held out a clear plastic bag containing a wallet, watch, and some money. All Chase’s things. But that still doesn’t mean—

“I want to see the body,” she suddenly decided.

“No, you don’t, ma’am. It’s not necessary.” By the look in his eyes, the patrolman was saying it was not only unnecessary but not recommended in this case. Heather only became more determined.

“I want to see it for myself.” She spoke slowly and clearly, so there would be no mistake.

The two patrolmen looked at each other. Her tone of voice gave them no choice. While they radioed from their car to make arrangements, Heather returned to the house and called Julie.

Los Angeles Times
March 21, 1993
Page 11–B

DEATH NOTICES

PORTER

CHASE PORTER, 33, passed away March 12, beloved husband of Heather, dearest father of Dylan, precious son of Glen and Virginia, brother of Patricia Arndt and Jonathan Porter. Private services were held. Arrangement by Tomon & Sons.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
May 23, 1994

Son of a bitch.

Chase Porter, Heather's husband, really did die last year. Found the obituary, shown on the previous page. That just blows me away. I wonder how Heather feels about that. Geez, if my wife died, I wouldn't turn around and make a movie where the story includes her death, even if it *is* fictionalized. Wes Craven loses points for insensitivity. Still, Heather's making the movie, so what's up with that?

It was really bugging me so I called my agent, Laurel, and asked how Chase had really died. Was it a car accident? Murder? Suicide? I guess I must have sounded like a ghoul, because she didn't want to answer. Instead, she changed the subject.

She asked how the writing was going, and I said fine but slow. When she wanted to know if there was a problem, I just said that I wasn't sleeping well and couldn't concentrate. I didn't want to mention the nightmares specifically. It would sound silly. But when I told her what was wrong, she got really quiet. I must have really weirded her out, asking about Chase. Well, whatever . . . I was pretty weirded-out myself.

Then, cheerful as you please, she said to keep working. And write good stuff.

Pat, pat, pat . . . good doggie.

Then another call came in and she had to take it. At least that's what she said. Come to think of it, she may have just wanted me off her phone.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
June 4, 1994

Chase's death is on my mind. I can't find any more details.

Y'know, this wouldn't be the first film production with a curse. Not a real one, of course, but a supposed curse, which has a few superstitious individuals nervous. I broached the subject with Laurel, but carefully, setting it up for a laugh. Must have hit her at a bad moment—or a nerve—because she didn't laugh. Not even close. Instead, she told me, point-blank:

"Don't worry about that. Your job is to write the book. So write the book." She was very serious. Reading between the lines, I realized she was asking if I was still interested in writing the book or should they find someone else. Very quickly, I answered, "I'm writing, I'm writing, already."

And I rolled over and played dead.

This probably minor mystery isn't worth screwing up this deal. Uh-uh.

4

A whine like a dentist's drill echoed through the cold marble hallways. Its source was a room just ahead. Heather walked slowly, hoping her destination did not contain whatever made that sound. She didn't want to know what was making it. Or what it was doing when it made the sound.

Julie was back at the house with Dylan. She came right away after Heather had called. When she arrived, she threw her arms around Heather and started sobbing. Heather hugged back but did not cry. Perhaps later. She was determined not to cry until she saw the body. After all, this could be a dreadful mistake. Maybe Chase had been robbed by a hitchhiker, who left him on the side of the road. Then the robber had crashed and the body they held was his, not her husband's. Chase might even arrive home while she was gone.

The notion seemed less plausible and more desperate as the patrolmen drove Heather to the morgue. It was unlikely such a huge mistake would have been made. But she clung to the idea, anyway. Otherwise, she would have started crying.

The morgue was in the basement, of course. The antiseptic smell that hit her when she stepped off the elevator couldn't hide the dark scent of death. Bodies lined her path, corpses on gurneys waiting for examination or transportation. She tried to ignore them.

Heather stopped at a door with the words LOS ANGELES COUNTY MORGUE stenciled on it. Beyond it came laughter—and the disturbing whining sound. Heather swallowed and turned the doorknob. Just then, a woman's anguished wail reverberated from somewhere in the distance. Sounds like someone's desperate notion has just been torn from them, she thought sadly. Holding her breath, Heather opened the door and entered. When she did, she found three pairs of eyes staring at her. Two belonged to attendants eating sandwiches from paper bags. A third attendant stood at a nearby table, lifting something wet and dark out of the corpse before him. Near him was a bloody tool that looked like an electric screwdriver with a small, circular saw attachment.

"Help you?" the third man asked, dropping the organ onto a scale with a sickening plop. Heather's stomach lurched violently and she swallowed hard to keep from throwing up. The others in the room seemed untroubled by the fact that while they were eating, an autopsy was being performed only a few feet away.

“Porter,” she choked out when she could finally speak. “Chase Porter.” She hoped they wouldn’t know what she was talking about and she could leave. Chase was probably waiting at home for her right this minute.

“That a new one?” the attendant asked, twiddling his bloody, gloved fingers in the air while he tried to remember the name.

For a moment, Heather thought her wish had been granted. She felt herself turning to leave. Then one of the attendants eating lunch spoke up and pointed past her.

“Over there. Third from the sink.”

Heather saw where he was pointing. A body under a thick plastic sheet. Only the feet showed. She willed herself to move toward it. The attendant who had spoken up joined her and immediately checked the toe tag, but she already knew. Even pale and drained of blood, Chase had such wonderful feet.

“You say Chase?” the man asked. All she could do was nod. “Sorry,” he said with great sincerity. He lifted a corner of the sheet.

Chase Porter, her husband, was dead.

Blood matted down his hair, emphasizing the unnatural shape of his head due to the force of the accident. Despite that, his closed eyes made him seem at peace. She hoped he was. Wherever he was.

The attendant lowered the sheet as Heather’s gaze drifted to Chase’s strong chin. Something caught her eye just before his face was covered completely.

“Just sign at the bottom,” he said, handing her a clipboard that had hung at the foot of the table. “That’s all we need.”

Heather ignored the clipboard. The sheet still commanded her attention.

“Let me see once more,” she said, not taking her eyes away.

“I’m sorry?” The attendant looked shocked. Apparently, nobody ever wanted to see more.

“Lift the sheet again,” she commanded in a dull voice.

Heather could tell the attendant didn’t think she was serious. So she looked right at him to show just how deadly serious she was. Shaking his head in disbelief, he lifted the sheet again. Chase’s face peeked out from underneath.

“More,” she told the attendant.

He raised his eyebrows but lifted the sheet a little further.

Heather could see Chase’s chin now. And below it, what she had only glimpsed before.

“What’s that?” she asked quietly, pointing to a flap of whitish skin

protruding from beneath Chase's chin.

"Um, well, this was a bad wreck, ma'am." And if you ask for more, lady, I'm not gonna give it to you, his expression said. The next "more" will be too much, I can guarantee ya that. "I mean, his head's gonna be okay for the funeral and all, but—"

Heather didn't *ask* for more, she took it. Reaching out suddenly, she tore the sheet back before the attendant could stop her. Chase's ravaged torso was entirely visible now. Holding it together were rough mortician's stitches—along four long, deep slashes down his chest.

Heather shrank back in horror while the attendant pulled the sheet back over Chase. Her stomach bucked again, and this time she could not stop it. She spun around and vomited.

When she was through, the attendant offered her a piece of cloth to wipe her mouth. She took it with shaking hands.

"Oh, now, there—you okay, lady?" Despite the fact that she had gotten what she asked for, the attendant seemed truly sorry for her. But she wasn't finished. Heather wasn't ready to let Chase go yet. There was one more thing she needed to know.

"What did that?" she asked in a terrified whisper.

The man shook his head, amazed she didn't just give up.

"Ma'am, it was a head-on," he told her reluctantly. "I heard the truck was torn up something awful. You can imagine he'd, well, not be exactly in top shape." He had no idea how to comfort a woman who only wanted the bad news.

"It looks like . . . he was clawed."

He nodded slightly, as if in agreement.

"Yeah, well, that's why we don't lift the sheet past the face, ma'am. Sometimes what you don't see is what gets you through the night." Then he took her by the arm and escorted her upstairs, where the policemen waited to take her home.

The next two days blurred by for Heather. During that time, Julie stayed at the house and took care of Dylan. Heather was almost completely nonfunctional all the while. Despite sedatives prescribed by her doctor, she never slept. But she was never truly awake, either. Sometimes she would cry. Most often she simply stared. The best moments were when Dylan would come to sit on her lap. They'd sit together for an hour at a time, neither speaking, but communing nonetheless.

The next thing she knew, she was burying her husband.

Surrounding her at the cemetery were her friends. Among them were Sara and Bob from New Line, as well as Robert and Wes. Johnny

Depp and John Saxon, her father in the *Elm Street* movies, had also come. A regular reunion, she thought dully. She was feeling no pain. The only thing connecting her to the moment was the pressure of Dylan's hand in hers. Julie stood on the other side of him.

The service was ending as the casket began to sink into the grave. Heather whispered goodbye and looked down at Dylan. His expression remained as it had all morning: gray and unreadable as stone. His mind was still processing his father's death.

A sudden gust of wind rustled the trees behind the gathering. The next moment the ground began to rumble beneath their feet.

"Earthquake!" someone cried as the ground started heaving. The crowd scattered. Gravestones became crooked teeth rising from the grass. Nearby, a large monument fell over.

The men lowering the casket were thrown away from the winches. One end unwound too quickly, tilting the casket at a wicked angle. It banged against the side of the grave and fell end-first into the pit, landing with a sickening crack. Heather lurched forward, the moving earth tangling her feet, and she was launched toward the grave. Her head connected sharply with the metal framework. She dropped to the ground.

In her daze, Heather could see the others stumbling over headstones, trying to find solid footing. Then, after what seemed to be hours, the shaking stopped. Silence returned. Silence—except for the car alarms.

Heather sat up slowly, rubbing the sore spot on her head. Julie came to help her up. Her son was nowhere in sight.

"Julie . . . where's Dylan?" she shouted.

The other woman stopped and looked around. Soon the others spread out to find him. Heather jumped to her feet in a panic. On a hunch, she peered down into the grave.

And there, leering from behind the coffin's broken lid, was Freddy Krueger!

Only, it wasn't Freddy, not like Robert was Freddy in the movies. This Freddy had the presence of a demon from the lowest depths of hell. Evil rose off him like the stink of a thousand morgues. And his power was unimaginable. All this she felt in the moment their eyes met before he withdrew into the darkness of the coffin—dragging Dylan down with him!

Without hesitation, she leaped down into the pit. Dylan was just sliding into the coffin. She wrenched back the lid, and there he was, about to disappear into a dark slot at the bottom of the coffin. It was the danger area Dylan had described in his bed. This time, however, Rex was not there to keep the mean man away. She'd lose him if she

wasn't quick. Diving forward, she caught his hand just in time. But Freddy, or whatever that thing was, didn't give up easily. It took all her strength to pull Dylan back. It seemed he would be torn apart. Then with one last surge, she yanked harder, and the Freddy-thing let go. Dylan came up through the slot. For a moment Heather glimpsed an impossibly long arm, striped red and green, withdrawing into darkness beyond the coffin. At the end of the arm was the Claw of her nightmare. She closed her eyes to shut out the sight, but could not block out the maniacal, mocking laughter that echoed all around her.

Together, she and Dylan tumbled out of the coffin and into the pit. He was screaming. The laughter began to fade and Heather opened her eyes. Chase stared at her, his dead eyes inches away. Her mind clamped shut and she saw no more.

The first sensation was of hands touching her. Then voices. Murmuring at first, then louder, saying her name. Where was she? Not at home. The smell of grass. Outside. Heather opened her eyes. Robert, Wes, and John hovered around, concerned. Others farther away. Someone missing. Who?

"Dylan!" she cried in panic. Everything came back—the funeral, the earthquake, the Freddy-thing dragging Dylan through the bottom of the coffin. She had passed out. Dylan was gone!

She struggled to rise, but strong hands held her from going too quickly. Her head ached.

"He's right here," said John, pointing. "It's okay!" His voice was deep and calm. For ten years he'd been like a real father to her. Now he commanded her attention like a father would and she stopped struggling. Following his outstretched hand, she saw a shaken Julie. Next to her stood Dylan. His expression was at once intense, frightened, and eerie.

John helped her to her feet.

"What . . . happened?" Apparently, no one had seen.

"Quake knocked you off your feet. You got bumped pretty good, actually." He dabbed at her forehead with a handkerchief. She was bleeding. Bumped my head? But—

Heather looked at the casket. It hung level once more—and in one piece. Confusion tangled her thoughts and memories. No one had seen anything because nothing had happened. Or had something happened that no one but her could see? A small aftershock rolled through the cemetery, echoing the rumblings in her mind. Heather grabbed John's arm to steady herself from both.

"May he rest in peace," the minister said quickly, ending the

ceremony, to the relief of those gathered. “And may you all get home safely!” That said, he headed for his car, as did many others.

Robert Englund did not rush away. He stood behind Heather, quietly, waiting for her to turn around. Guilt had preyed on his mind for two days now. Guilt over Chase’s death. It made no sense, he knew, but the feeling would not go away. Somehow he felt responsible. And being at the funeral made it worse.

Heather turned and bumped into him. Robert opened his mouth, prepared to apologize. But he didn’t know what to say. Or what good it would do. She’d think he’d lost it. So Robert just put his hand on her shoulder and mumbled, “If there’s anything I can do, Heather, anything.” What else *could* he say? Sorry, Heather, I killed your husband? If he was going crazy, he didn’t need to take her with him. He pulled on his hat against the rising wind and left Heather to mourn her husband.

John put his arm around Heather as she watched Robert walk away. Robert had been about to say something. Something important, it seemed. Robert was taking Chase’s death harder than the rest of her friends. She hoped he was all right. Something in his expression made her start to wonder if he was having nightmares.

She stopped herself right there. There was no sense going down that path again.

Heather gave one last glance to the coffin before she let John walk her and Dylan to the car. She thought of the last time she had seen Chase alive. Their last, long kiss had worn off hours ago. And she’d never have another.

Seeing her fresh tears, John offered to come back to the house with Heather and Dylan, but she declined. That was sweet of him, she thought. She could use a strong presence like his around. Even for just one day, now that Chase was gone. However, one day turns to two, and two to four, and then a lifetime of relying on others suddenly goes by. Already it was obvious to her how much she depended on Chase for stability. She had to relearn self-sufficiency. That meant no more being afraid of nightmares or phone calls, no more reading into every unexplained look or gesture, and getting serious professional help if it came down to that. Because if she didn’t start fighting whatever was happening to her, she’d lose more than just her sanity. She’d lose Dylan. And that would be a loss from which she would not recover.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
June 6, 1994

I shut off the ringer on the phone a few days ago cuz the sound was getting too distracting. Then I stuffed the answering machine under a pillow because the clicking it made when it picked up was downright annoying. Every night—or early morning, depending when I get done writing—I check for messages. Some guy named Jason LeCroix (he spelled it for me) has called three times in the last two days. Never heard of the guy—and he claims it’s important that we talk. But that’s all he says, except to give his number.

Well, if it’s important, he would have at least given a clue as to what he’s calling about. I don’t have time for guessing games right now. I’m too busy even to return my own friends’ calls, let alone those of “urgent” strangers. If he really needs to talk to me, he’ll call back again. My bet is that he’s a salesman or something like that.

* * *

The wind continued to blow for hours after the funeral. Heather listened to it howl as she stared at the bedroom ceiling. The sound made her think of Chase screaming as he died. She was sure he had. No one tried to tell her that his death had been instantaneous, or that he felt no pain. They knew she had seen the body. She had seen it at the funeral today as well. Had even crawled over it, she remembered. The wind seemed to be whipping her thoughts, keeping her awake. She pulled the blankets tighter and closed her eyes.

She opened them at a sound from downstairs. Singing. Someone walking around. Dylan? She got out of bed and grabbed a robe. Peering into his room, she saw that his bed was empty. At the top of the stairs, she could just see his feet down in the living room. Circling.

Heather quietly descended the stairs until she could see his face. His eyes were closed and he mumbled unintelligibly. Dylan was sleepwalking. She continued down the stairs, trying to figure out what to do. Supposedly, it was dangerous to wake a sleepwalker. But he could hurt himself. Whatever she did, it had to be done gently.

Dylan paused briefly near the television. She hadn't noticed until then that it was on. All her resolutions of courage shattered at the sight of herself on the screen. It was the *Elm Street* movie again, at the scene where she—Nancy, she corrected—is in the boiler room for the first time. Freddy stepped out from behind the furnace, a dangerous silhouette. Heather glanced over her shoulder, as if Freddy stood at the top of the stairs. The landing was empty, but she felt a presence nonetheless.

She heard a thump and turned back to Dylan. He had veered out of his circle and walked into the coffee table. A glass bowl shook but did not fall. Then he turned and followed an invisible path into the kitchen. Forgetting the television for the moment, Heather followed. When she caught up to him, she wrapped her arms around him firmly but gently. His eyes were still closed.

"Dylan . . . sweetie," she half whispered. "Wake up, baby."

His eyes twitched beneath his lids, then they snapped open. Terror warped his face as he yelled out and pushed away from her. Arms pinwheeling, he landed on his back on the floor. She stooped down to hold him again, but he lashed out, kicking and flailing. He was violently defending himself against her—or who he thought she was.

He stopped all at once, finally recognizing his mother. Heather was too stunned to move. The only sound became Dylan's labored breathing.

“Dylan, baby, we’re gonna get you back to bed now,” she said, reaching to pick him up. He wouldn’t let her. His feet stamped against the floor and he shook his head.

“I can’t sleep there, Mommy,” he cried. “Please!” He was terrified. She knew the feeling. But Dylan was obviously in dire need of rest.

“You’ve got to sleep, Dylan,” she began gently. “You—”

“One, two, Freddy’s coming for you,” he sang, cutting her off. His voice sounded thin and frightened.

Heather was unable to hold herself up and sat back heavily against the refrigerator. She tried to look at Dylan but couldn’t focus. By the time her vision stopped swimming, his tears had subsided, but not his fear. It took two tries for her voice to work.

“Dylan, did you hear that in that movie?”

“What movie?” he asked, confused.

Of course he knew what movie, Heather thought. He’d been watching it when she came down the steps. She looked over to the television and saw only a blank screen. There was a timer, so the television could have turned off by itself after they went into the kitchen. She dragged herself off the floor and returned to the living room. Dylan followed, baffled, as if she were the sleepwalker now. She picked up the remote and zapped. Nothing. Zap. Still nothing. Maybe the batteries are dead, she thought. Heather pressed the power button on the television itself, but still nothing happened. Then she saw it. The wall outlet was in view just behind the television.

The television was still unplugged from two days ago.

She turned to Dylan. He watched her, too curious to see what she was doing to be afraid anymore. At the moment, she was frightened enough for both of them.

“Then . . . where did you hear that song? Did you answer the phone?”

He shook his head. “In my bed,” he answered.

“Your bed?”

“Under my covers—”

Covers? The only thing under there was Rex. And something else that Rex was supposed to be protecting Dylan from.

“Kids singing,” he continued, noticing her strange look. “And way down there, the man.” His voice faltered. He was very afraid. “The mean man.” He hooked his hand, making the sign of the Claw.

It became very hard to breathe. And to see. And to remain conscious. She fought off the black flies that threatened to swarm her mind, and focused on Dylan.

“And . . . what’s the man doing?”

“Trying to get up,” he said. “Trying to get into our world.” He seemed ready to say more but a funny look came over his face. A moment later thick blood flowed from his nose.

“Oh shit, Dylan . . .”

He touched his hand to the blood and stared at his fingers in shock. Heather grabbed him and rushed to the bathroom. The nosebleed stopped quickly, but it had scared him once more. He began crying again, quietly this time, as Heather cleaned away the blood with a warm washcloth.

After his story of the mean man, Heather could not bear to make Dylan sleep alone. She took him up to her room, but before he would settle down, he insisted she bring Rex. Her bed became a little crowded with the three of them, but it was important that Dylan feel safe. And she could use a little of that feeling herself. He curled up next to her, and she listened as his breathing became deep and regular. She wished she could sleep, but at this point she needed to stand guard. In case Rex fell asleep.

The wind continued to howl. She tried not to think about Chase screaming. She tried not to think about the television being unplugged. She tried not to think at all. But she couldn’t stop thinking.

“Where’s Daddy now?” Dylan asked suddenly, startling her.

Heather had been dreading this question. And now wasn’t the best time for it. But she had to take a stab.

“Daddy’s . . . in heaven.” Truthfully, she wasn’t sure herself. But Dylan was too young for philosophy. He needed to believe his father was in a good place. “He’s with God now.”

He said nothing for a moment and she thought he had fallen back to sleep. Instead, he was evaluating her answer.

“Do you have to die to see God?” he asked.

“No, I don’t think so. You just have to pray. Or reach.” She was winging it now.

“Why does God let there be bad things?”

“I honestly don’t know. Try to sleep, baby.”

Dylan was trying to make some sense of his father’s death, she thought. His effort made her realize that she didn’t have any suitable answers for her son. Perhaps not even for herself. The fact was, she’d never seriously considered the questions. Until now, Heather had only experienced death when it was inevitable, due to old age or a long, debilitating illness. Such mortality didn’t demand an examination of one’s beliefs. Violent, unexpected deaths like Chase’s had a different effect. People were forced to confront those beliefs. Or, as Heather was beginning to realize, they faced a lack of beliefs.

Dylan interrupted her current tangent with one final question.

"Can you come with me in my dreams?" He was as serious as when asking about God. But this was an easier one to answer. It involved less esoteric beliefs that had been examined long ago.

"I think that only happens in movies. But I'll always be here when you get back." She lifted the covers and looked underneath with great drama. Rex's teeth showed dimly in the dark. "And I'll make sure nobody grabs your toes, either." She tickled him and he giggled. It was the first time in almost three days. He turned over and closed his eyes.

Finally, he's going to sleep, she thought. She found his laughter energizing. Still, if she was going to stay up all night, she'd need more caffeine. So she reached to the bedside table and gulped hot coffee from a mug.

As she drank, she did not notice Dylan moving. Carefully reaching down, he turned Rex to face the darkness at the foot of the bed.

Within an hour, both of them were asleep. Heather hung on longer, but the weight of the past few days finally pressed her eyes closed. Luckily, no nightmares awaited them.

When morning came, Heather awoke calm and rested. It was a pleasant change from her recent habit of bolting awake screaming. Her mind was absolutely clear. For the first time in weeks, she felt ready for whatever the day threw at her. And when it started flying, this time she wouldn't duck. Her problems were not over, that much was certain. The business with the television still preyed on her mind. How had it been showing the movie while unplugged? She didn't even have to look at a cable guide to know *Elm Street* hadn't been scheduled that night. Or that first morning when she found Dylan watching, just before the phone calls began again. Was it another delusion, like thinking she had dreamed of the cut on Chase's hand, or . . . Or what?

Or was something horrible and impossible happening? To both her and Dylan. The thought stirred up a profound dread deep inside, but the feeling no longer threatened to paralyze her. The instinct to cringe in the face of terror had fled in the night. Perhaps Chase had taken it with him. If so, he had left his strength in return.

Heather got out of bed carefully so she wouldn't wake Dylan. He was resting comfortably. Hopefully, he had been touched by his father as well. After she pulled on her robe, she patted Rex through the covers. Keep up the good work, she told him.

Dylan came down as Heather fixed breakfast. Unfortunately, his

outlook was not much improved. He claimed to have had no dreams, but clearly, something was on his mind. She didn't push him. As last night showed, even frightened, he never hesitated to ask questions. Heather just hoped to have better explanations when the time came. Gaining a perspective on her own feelings about recent events would help them both.

The isolation was the first feeling that had to be eliminated. It meant imposing on someone—a move she had rejected earlier—but really, she had no choice. She could no longer go this alone. And her objectivity was suspect at the moment. Wes Craven and his nightmares came to mind again. Perhaps he wasn't a good choice for confessor, after all. While he was a dear friend, and would easily be sympathetic, what she needed was someone totally outside the experience. Wes might be too keyed into his own nightmares to help her effectively. Her feelings needed to be picked apart and the real issues identified. But a psychiatrist wouldn't work, either, not at this stage. She needed someone practical, not clinical. It was important to find someone who already knew her history, or was even a part of it. Her father, had he been alive, would have been ideal for the task. So she called her other father, John Saxon.

John agreed to meet her that afternoon in a nearby park. She wanted to get Dylan out of the house. His mood had improved only marginally by lunchtime. He was quiet and mostly kept to himself. The idea of going to a park perked him up a bit, but not much. At least he didn't seem upset, just preoccupied. And considering everything he'd been through, his behavior was normal enough.

When they got to the park, Heather found a bench at one end of the playground, which was dominated by a twenty-five-foot-tall metal rocket. It was crawling with children. Not feeling sociable, Dylan played on the swings while Heather waited for John. As soon as he arrived, Heather knew she had done the right thing. He looked tanned and fit, younger than her father had been when he died, but looked paternal nonetheless in a new sweat suit. His smile alone put her at ease. Still, she realized that as reassuring as his presence might be, that in itself did not solve anything. So she told her story and John listened patiently. When she got to the part about Dylan, she could feel the dread beginning to bubble up again.

"I know what he's doing is bizarre," she told John. "But most of the time he seems so normal, so well adjusted. I just can't believe it's him. I mean that it's not something outside influencing him." It was the first time she mentioned her suspicion that there might be an external force at work. Looking into John's eyes, sitting in a park filled with children playing, it seemed a sadly desperate thing to say.

“Or is that how denial works?” she asked him. Her courage sprung another tiny leak.

“When it *is* denial,” John answered, dismissing any self-doubt as unworthy of her. “I don’t think that’s the case here, but if you’re really worried, have a doctor check him out. You’ll see. Everything’s fine.”

Heather searched his face for signs he was humoring her. She found none. But she had to ask. “You’re not just saying that to help a crazy friend cope, are you?”

John smiled and shook his head. “All of Dylan’s behavior is understandable for a kid dealing with a parent’s death. How can a child process such a thing?”

“Don’t know,” Heather replied. “Haven’t been able to process it very well myself.” She was fighting to keep from shutting down again.

“You’re not crazy, by the way,” he said quickly, as if sensing her withdrawal.

She didn’t believe she was crazy, either. But unfortunately, insanity was actually preferable to the alternative: that she was sane and something evil was after her and Dylan. Then again, maybe that was proof that she was insane, after all. Her mind had twisted into a Moebius strip where the rational and the irrational alternated in a twisted, infinite loop.

“Thinking I saw Freddy in the grave feels pretty crazy,” she said, starting down the rational but insane path. “And jumping in—”

“You *didn’t* jump in,” John interjected.

“That’s *my* memory. And it seemed absolutely real.” And suddenly she was on the other side of the loop, irrational but sane.

“Seemed, not was,” John emphasized. He was trying to clear away her confusion. It was almost working.

Dylan now stood beneath the rocket, halfheartedly drawing pictures in the sand with a stick. Heather saw him and knew she had to tell John her family “heritage.”

“It’s in my family, you know.” She spoke low and ashamed. “My grandmother died in an institution . . .” Her voice trailed off. Now she was truly embarrassed.

John was unfazed. “Really?” he asked dryly. “Hell, if having a screwy family made you crazy, the world’d be one colossal nuthouse.”

Was he serious? she wondered, turning to him. He *was* serious. His big grin told her. He laughed, and she couldn’t help but laugh herself.

John saw he was making some headway and pressed his point.

“Look, you’ve got a crazed fan after you. That’s what’s making you crazy. And probably Dylan, too.”

“I’ve never mentioned it to him.”

"Kids know when something's bugging a parent." That problem solved, John switched gears. Though he sympathized with her about the psychotic caller, the situation seemed to intrigue him. "You've got no idea who's been calling?"

Heather looked past John's shoulder to watch Dylan in the playground again. She only had one guess as to the caller's identity.

"Freddy, for all I know," she said, knowing how it sounded.

"Steady . . ." he warned.

She drew strength from his voice and managed a smile. This discussion was about reality, she reminded herself. Not paranoid delusions. She made an effort to stay on track—not that she could trust where it would lead—and gave him a more reasonable answer.

"A man, or a boy with a deep, y'know, Freddy voice." Still, would a Freddy-*like* voice scare her so much? But even the "real" Freddy was a fictional character. Her mind did another lap on the Moebius strip.

John took her gently by the shoulders and looked right into her eyes.

"Six weeks of this, and you're surprised you've got Freddy in your dreams?" She tried to look away but he wouldn't let her. She wanted perspective, she was gonna get it. "Hell, Sonny Bono says after a while he was seeing his stalker everywhere, even at Mass."

"Really?" Heather had heard something about that. Her first reaction had been to wonder who on earth would want to stalk Sonny Bono. She was a lot more sympathetic now.

"Absolutely," John said, driving his point home. "And how many times has Letterman called the cops thinking that woman was down in his kitchen again? It gets under your skin if you let it."

She had to admit she was good at letting things under her skin. But that was just her. What about her son?

"You really think Dylan's okay?"

He smiled a warm, fatherly smile. "Dylan's fine. You're fine. Hurting, but fine." He held her in his gaze for another moment and added, "Definitely not crazy."

Between the look on his face and the conviction in his voice, Heather was almost won over. She had meant to be. Wanted to be. And as his eyes pleaded with her to accept comfort and reason, neither of them noticed Dylan squeezing through a broken guardrail at the top of the rocket.

"It's my worst fear," she told him, shaking her head, "that whatever my grandmother had, I'll have, and I'll pass it along to . . ." and she instinctively looked over toward the rocket.

Dylan now stood on the nose cone, shakily balanced, stretching his

arms toward the sky. He was going to fall.

At first Heather froze. John saw her look and turned around. Other children and parents began to point. A murmur ran through the playground.

Dylan didn't notice. He seemed concerned only with touching the clouds. His hands strained upward. Harder. His feet slipped slightly. He compensated, catching himself, but that threw him in the other direction. His body wobbled like a top losing its spin. As his hands grabbed for purchase in thin air, he lost his balance entirely. With a cry he fell from the rocket.

In Heather's mind, the entire playground and everyone on it had frozen. Except for Dylan, who was falling, slowly. Then she was moving, around the soft-shelled mannequins, toward her son. Dylan still falling. Her shoes slapping on concrete, then one crunching in sand. Now her arms extended. Dylan just out of reach. Both feet in sand now—

Slam! Dylan landed on Heather like an anvil and drove her to the ground. For an infinite minute the world tasted like sand, rang in her ears, and hurt like hell. Then a weight was lifted off her and she was helped to a sitting position by John. She randomly wondered if he wasn't getting tired of scraping her off the pavement.

When the playground had stopped spinning, she looked to see Dylan, sitting next to her very calmly, gazing up at the sky. He seemed unhurt, and completely unaware of his close call. Only a disappointed expression showed on his face. Then he turned toward her.

"God wouldn't take me," he said.

From the Journal of David Bergantino June 7, 1994

ohgodohgodohgodohgodohgodohgodohgodohgodohgod!!

Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiitttttttttttt!!!!!!!!!

Just woek up. Freddy. Got me. Not killed. Graabed my foot. Geez it hirts. Mustve bnged it on the wall or somthing. waitaminit—I'm bleding. My fuckin' foot's bleeding! Hoold on . . .

Later:

Got a bandage around my foot. You're gonna love this one: the sole of my foot had a tidy little gash down the center of it. What is it? Three in the morning or something? Four? I can't tell. Knocked my clock over. Hold on . . .

4:27—Hey, buddy, can I have a piece of your mind? Cuz I'm *fresh outta mine!!!!*

I'm not going back to bed.

I'm not going to lie down on the couch.

And I *ain't* going back to sleep. Don't ask me to work on the book, either.

It's times like this I wished I took drugs. Oh well. I guess I'll just have to cope.

Later:

Okay, so now it's late morning and I just read my after-nightmare rant. Man, I was scared. Abject terror sure makes you a bad speller. At least I got the swear words right. And that was a doozy of a dream. It was the first time he (shuddering at the thought) touched me. And then the cut. It still hurts. Also, got a fair amount of blood on my sheets. When I took them off my bed this morning, a soda can tab (or beer can tab, if you must know)

fell out onto the floor. I collect them for a diabetic friend who exchanges them for time on a dialysis machine. Apparently, one ended up in my bed. In my tossing and turning (credit for tossing and turning goes to one Freddy Krueger), I managed to slice my foot open on the jagged part that sometimes remains when the tabs are torn off the cans.

Well, there's one mystery solved.

I hope.

Was going to do a big push with the book today, but between the exhaustion and the injured foot, my desire to write is a smidgen dampened. I think today's a beach day—sunscreen and some dozing. Never had a nightmare on a beach. Could use the break.

I know, I know—that's three days in a row and I'm on a deadline, but at this rate I'll have gone crazy and/or lost a limb before I can finish anyway.

So I'll get back to writing tomorrow. Or the next day.

5

The drive back from the park was a quiet one. Dylan sat with a serene face, occasionally glancing up at the sky. Heather wondered why he was so calm. It wasn't that he didn't remember his fall, he merely found it inconsequential. Especially compared to his attempt to reach God. Heather felt like kicking herself for that one. The way her body hurt, it would have been redundant. Last night when Dylan had been asking questions, she had forgotten the tendency of children to take literally what is said to them. Bad mistake. Almost tragic. At least *he* was taking it well.

When they reached home. Dylan voluntarily went up to his room for a nap. His willingness surprised Heather, but she didn't question it. If he was going to have a delayed reaction to the accident, sleep might soften the blow. Besides, Heather needed some time alone to recover. Popping a couple of Advil, she limped out to the mailbox. The bright, warm sun seemed to deny that anything was amiss in the world. The newspaper told otherwise, with headlines of the earthquakes and various pockets of war. What did the sun know, anyway? she wondered sullenly.

Walking into the house, she sorted through the mail. Besides the newspaper, there were magazines, various bills, and junk mail galore. Her heart jumped to her throat at the sight of an envelope addressed to Chase, a card by the looks of it. The name on the return address was that of an old high school friend of her husband's. Not many people knew yet. She shuffled the envelope to the back of the pile. The pain was still too fresh for her to deal with it right now.

The next piece of mail was a magazine featuring a photograph of a young famine victim. She turned it facedown, not uncompassionate, but because there was no more room at the inn for suffering. Then she came upon an envelope that brought back the black flies. She willed them away. You know what this is, she told herself. You may not like it, but it can't be any worse than before. Open it.

Smudges of soot covered the otherwise plain, unaddressed envelope. They were the most uncanny things, these little "love letters" from her persecutor. The police found no fingerprints on them. The smears of filth were effectively unnerving, but untraceable. And early on, when the police had the house under surveillance, they never saw one delivered by anyone but the postal carrier. Apparently, the envelopes were being stuffed in the carrier's bundles after he left the post office.

The police had even followed him on his route, but gave up when that tack yielded no results.

Come to think of it, the investigation had yielded no results whatsoever. The police seemed untroubled by the lack of progress. Harassment cases such as this one rarely get solved, they said—unless the stalker physically attacks the victim. At the time, Heather thought it was unlikely she could ever feel more vulnerable. Then Chase had died and she saw how much worse it could be.

Slowly, she lifted the flap of the envelope and looked inside. As before, it contained one sheet of grimy paper. She pulled it out and unfolded it. Pasted in the center of the page was a single letter: an *E*. Suddenly angry and afraid, she jammed the paper back into the envelope and stuffed it into a desk drawer with the others. She found these single letters more unnerving than a complete message would have been. They probably spelled something, but she never had the nerve to work it out. She slammed the drawer shut, then opened it again. The idea of burning them came to mind.

Instead, she picked up the phone and dialed. It rang a few times, then she heard a click.

"Hello?" said a voice, very much like Freddy's, but not the one that tormented her. This Freddy was her friend.

"Robert?"

When Heather called, Robert Englund was painting. For years, he'd been an avid amateur painter. Several of his works had been shown in small galleries, he was proud to say. But it was acting that had given him the type of lifestyle where he could enjoy painting as he did. When asked, he told people that acting was his job, but painting was his life. And that was no more true than today.

Robert recoiled slightly when he heard Heather's voice. He remembered his feelings of guilt at the funeral. They had lessened somewhat but had not vanished completely. Until he understood what was happening to him, he had planned on not contacting Heather. Now that she had called him, he had no choice. Besides, there was a shrill note in her voice at the moment, and he'd feel like a coward if he ignored her. After all, she had just lost her husband. And she was a friend.

"Heather? You doing okay?" He tried to make his voice sound casual.

"Holding my own," she said. By her tone, she wasn't calling in the capacity of a widow right now. "You know that guy who was calling me all the time? He's started again. He's been putting stuff in my

mail."

Robert's paintbrush paused midstroke. Though he was trying to pay attention to Heather, he couldn't stop painting.

"Must've read about the funeral." He knew very well it hadn't received any significant media attention, but she didn't notice the slip. "Sick mother. That's the last thing you need right now, I'm sure." A dab of red. There was a lot of red in this painting.

"It's actually been giving me Freddy nightmares," Heather told him, sounding embarrassed. Robert thought for a moment. The line noise from his portable phone sounded faintly like crackling flames.

Robert took a deep breath. "Freddy as in me?" He was daubing his brush in a deep green he had just mixed.

"It isn't you," answered Heather. "He's scarier. He's . . ."

"Darker?" he said, completing her sentence. The distress in her voice made Robert put down his brush. He walked to the window and gazed out onto the lawn. The day was gorgeous. How could they be talking about such ugliness on a day like today? "More . . . evil?" he finished.

"Yeah. How'd you know?" His response had clearly surprised her.

"Call it a guess." He shrugged, back in casual mode, and returned to the painting. More black. It needed much more black. Furiously, he began to paint, the phone pinned between his ear and shoulder. He nearly forgot Heather was even on the line.

"Anyway . . ." Her voice startled him but he kept on painting. "What I was calling about was, have you seen any of the script, by any chance?"

That was a disquieting subject, but easier to talk about than the nightmares.

"Wes won't show it until it's finished. That's what he told me, at least. I asked him at the funeral." He knew what Wes had said to Bob and Sara, but asked anyway. After all, it no doubt largely concerned him—or at least his character—so he thought he could finagle an early peek. Wes had been amiable, but adamant about not giving much detail. Since that time, Robert's need to see the script had grown, almost into an obsession.

"When do you think it'll be done?" Heather asked.

He wished he knew. "The way he's writing is so weird." Wes had explained the process to him. "Who knows? I asked him how far he had gotten, and—what was it he said?" The whole experience had been very surreal. Some things were hard to remember. Like in a dream. "Oh yeah, as far as Dylan trying to reach God. Weird, huh? That he'd have your kid in it?"

Now Heather went silent. He thought he heard her gasping for breath, but that just might have been line noise. When she finally spoke, it was almost a whisper.

“Robert?” And he knew it was coming. “Have *you* been having any nightmares?” she asked.

He pressed the phone to his chest, wanting to muffle Heather’s voice, stifle her question. He knew where the nightmares led. And he didn’t want to talk about it.

“Robert”—her voice came from far away—“I think we should talk. And not over the phone.” He could still hear her terrified edge. But there was hope, too. And perhaps that’s why he didn’t want to acknowledge her: because he didn’t have any hope at the moment. “Could I come over?” she asked.

He brought the phone back to his chin. Casual. Sound like you’re in the middle of something. It’s the truth.

“Uh, actually, today’s not good. There’s something I have to finish. How about tomorrow?” He didn’t want to see her tomorrow, either, but if he refused, she’d wonder why.

“Tomorrow, then. First thing in the morning.” Her voice was dead even. Then, with great concern, she said, “Meanwhile, take care, Robert, okay?” And hung up.

Robert didn’t put the phone down for a long time. He just stared at his painting. And the painting stared back.

Heather’s legs tried to buckle as soon as she hung up the phone, but she wouldn’t let them. Whether he realized it or not, Robert had just turned her world inside out. Whatever was happening extended beyond the realm of stalkers, stress, and simple nightmares. And maybe, as impossible as it should be, just maybe her hallucinations weren’t hallucinations, after all. Her entire conversation with John had effectively been rendered meaningless. She now wondered if he was having bad dreams and was merely hiding it well. He was right about one thing, though. She wasn’t crazy. Instead, it appeared that the universe itself had gone stark raving mad.

Dylan came to mind. She ran to his room and peered quietly in the door. His back was to her but she could see him breathing evenly. Good. He was asleep and not dreaming.

That grounded her for the moment, but as she descended the stairs, she remembered what Robert had said. Wes had written about Dylan reaching for God. Had *written* it! And the feeling she got from Robert at the funeral, that he was holding back something, returned. Tomorrow she wouldn’t leave until he told her everything. He might

not be getting phone calls or letters, and maybe wasn't having nightmares, either, but Robert was afraid. And whatever was frightening him concerned her as well. And Dylan.

And definitely Wes Craven.

She ran to the phone and dialed his number. No answer. During a writing jag, he frequently turned off the ringer on his phone. He didn't have an answering machine, either. It made him too accessible, he said. Damn his idiosyncrasies! she thought, and slammed down the phone. She wanted to drive right over to his house but realized he might not even be there. She couldn't leave Dylan alone, in any event. And this wasn't something she could explain to Julie.

She felt that Wes held the key. Accepting the fact they had become the targets of some unnatural force was one thing. Understanding what it was and knowing what it wanted from them were quite different stories. Such considerations were far beyond her. And if Wes was involved enough to be writing things that were actually happening, he might even know *why* they were happening. But right now his phone only rang.

So Heather decided to just sit tight—and to call Wes at least once an hour.

Later, Dylan came down from his nap. He didn't look very rested, but at least his eerie serenity had lifted. Her agitation was obvious to him, but he didn't ask any questions. Chances are, he knows exactly what's going on, she thought. He tried to tell me when he introduced Rex. Sometimes children's imaginations are just thinly veiled truth. The key is to recognize it. She fumbled the ball on this one, she thought. But could she be blamed? Who'd believe the kind of truth she was facing? But those issues were irrelevant now. It was time to deal in the present and future, not the past.

For the present, she fixed dinner for herself and Dylan. Afterward, Heather suggested they play games to distract themselves from their problems. Automatically, she brought out Scrabble. She and Chase used to play often, but it was a little beyond Dylan's spelling abilities. So they played Chutes and Ladders. It was a pleasant distraction, and the togetherness felt like a type of power to her. That simple game was the light of a campfire that protected them from the wild things that lurked in the darkness beyond. Dylan must have been feeling it, too, because when it was time for bed, he again went to his room without a complaint.

By nightfall, Wes had still not answered his phone. Heather wondered where he could be. At one point, she became convinced that something terrible had happened to him. The thought was easily

dismissed. If something had happened to Wes, she figured she'd know about it. But that didn't make the time she waited to talk to him pass any quicker.

After one last try to reach Wes—still no answer—Heather went to bed herself. There seemed to be nothing else to do but get through the night. Robert was first on her agenda for the morning. Then Wes, one way or another. She read until she dozed, then allowed herself to drift into sleep.

Not long after, Heather had a nightmare. In it, she saw herself sleeping while a small earthquake subtly shook the house. As it continued, she tossed and turned, the shock waves infiltrating her dreams.

Then she saw the living room. Dylan was roaming there like a ghost in the moonlight. His eyes were vacant. He was sleepwalking again.

In her room, the quake reverberated through her nightmare. As it grew in strength, her tossing became more violent. She moaned, and threw up her arms to protect herself from some invisible assailant.

Then movement at the bottom of the bed. The top sheet rose up on four closely spaced points. Metal showed dully beneath it. With a small rip, knife points poked through. They kept rising, the moonlight shining off the blades. Slowly, the razors of the Claw glided toward her face, leaving four slits in the fabric like a wake. Only a soft, continuous ripping sound had accompanied their progress.

They stopped not a foot away from her closed eyes. Then the blades effortlessly scissored the sheet. The Claw rose through the hole it had created. It flexed in the moonlight and readied to strike.

A metallic crash, the sound of a silverware drawer being dumped over, jolted her out of the nightmare.

She sat up and looked around. No earthquake. And no Claw. Just a bunch of twisted blankets. All things considered, it had been a merciful dream. Heather relaxed and let her breath out slowly. She pulled the covers back over her to guard against the chill that had developed.

Ribbons of fabric from the sheet engulfed her like a swarm of snakes. She threw the covers from her in a panic and jumped from the bed. The scratch of sharp metal drawn across metal shrieked down in the kitchen. Her head jerked toward the sound, and then she heard Dylan's voice.

"One, two, Freddy's coming for you," he chanted dully. She ran for the stairs.

"Three, four, better lock your door." Her injured leg tripped her up

and she nearly fell down the stairs. By the time she caught her balance, she was at the bottom. Dylan walked slowly toward her from the kitchen, his hands behind his back, hiding something.

“Five, six, grab your crucifix.”

Even though he was close, his voice had a haunted, distant quality. She started toward him, reaching out. “Sweetie, don’t sing that—”

Before she could finish, his hand lashed out with the speed of a striking cobra. She recoiled instinctively and a metal flash passed just in front of her. Dylan raised his right hand. He had taped a steak knife to each finger in a deadly imitation of Freddy’s claw.

“Seven, eight, better stay up late!” He advanced upon her, his breath coming in asthmatic rasps. She backed up against the wall and suddenly had nowhere to go. Dylan was upon her almost immediately. He swiped at her with the makeshift claw and she just barely caught his wrist. He fought with the strength of a rabid animal and freed himself from her grasp. Hate burned in his eyes.

“Nine, ten!” he hissed, and struck. Heather tried to dodge but she was cornered. She lurched backward—

—and landed on the floor beside her bed, now truly awake. Outside was the neutral gray light of early dawn. Much of the bedding had come with her in the fall. It was all intact. Her mind was still catching up when Dylan’s voice floated upstairs from the living room.

“Never sleep again.” Not rabid this time. Sad. His soft footsteps were just audible.

She limped down the stairs to find Dylan walking in a circle in the den, crying.

“Never sleep again, never sleep again,” he repeated as he circled. Scattered on the floor all around him were the filthy pages of letters.

“Dylan . . .” she began, but the pages on the floor caught her attention. They weren’t just lying there randomly. Looking closely, she saw that using the single letter from each page, Dylan had spelled out:

A N S W E R   T H E   P H O N E

The phone rang the instant she finished reading. Dylan stopped circling at the sound and looked up at her, frightened. The phone rang again, and without thinking, she picked it up.

“Yes?”

“I touched him,” said the evil voice. Before she could react, a long, fleshy tongue snaked out of the phone and thrust itself into her mouth. Choking, she flung the obscene thing away from her. Heather fought back the urge to vomit. The tongue had been warm.

At that instant Dylan let out a bloodcurdling scream and fell to the

ground. He lay on his side, gasping and kicking like an animal struck by a car. In one motion, Heather picked him up and ran for the door. By the time she strapped him into the car, he had gone limp. He was catatonic as she drove to the hospital.

June 9, 1994

David:

I waited, for a couple hours but you never came home. It's urgent that we speak—possibly a matter of life and death. I know it sounds kind of weird, but it has to do with your book.

Please call me at (818) 789-4242 as soon as you can. Call as late as you want. Believe me, I'll be awake.

I can't tell you in this note how important it is that I talk to you. But I will when you call.

Yours truly,

Jason LeCroix

**From the Journal of
David Bergantino
June 9, 1994**

Found the preceding note taped to my door when I got home from the beach today. This makes me very nervous. How the hell did he find out where I live? And what does he want? I almost feel like calling the police. For all I know, he could be the wacko that was harassing Heather, like in the tabloid article. Hell, he could be dangerous! I never did find out how Chase died, and who's to say this isn't the guy who killed him? It's nutcases like this who are responsible for the so-called curses. I *should* call the police.

But wait, maybe I'm just being a little too paranoid. How many psychos take the time to leave a telephone number? Usually, anonymity is their modus operandi. It still bothers me that this guy came to my house. And what's this about my book? How would he know about that? It's not like the book is any big secret, but on the other hand, no one's shouting it from the treetops that I'm working on it.

I thought of the stalker again. Maybe this LeCroix guy *is* him, and somehow he found out about my book and wants to give me the psycho perspective. That I can do without, since I have a newly acquired psycho perspective of my own. No, that's not right. He's no stalker.

I hope.

Well, at the very least, I'm curious. But I can't call him right away. I don't want to play into any game he might have going. I should at least wait until I calm down. That way, I'll be mellow and prepared to defend myself, physically or mentally, if he's going to start slinging shit at me. Let him stew. Make him wonder why I *don't* rush to call him back. Yeah, I like that. I'm calming down already. This is all up to me now, acting and not reacting.

The way it should be.

Later (June 10, 1994):

Waited until after midnight to call. He said he’d be up, so I thought I’d check and see. Wouldn’t ya know? I got his machine. His voice seems a lot calmer than when he was leaving messages on my machine.

Oh well, I guess the ball’s back in his court.

* * *

In a private room at the hospital, Dylan lay motionless in bed while he was examined by Dr. Christine Hefner, a tall woman with a severe face. She could tell that the boy's mother—sitting on the other side of the bed, holding her son's hand—had expected someone a little more . . . motherly. They always did. But Christine was a doctor—Chief of Pediatrics, to be exact—and not a mere mother. Her position was due to her skills in children's medicine, not to any cosmetic maternal disposition. As she shined a light into the boy's eyes to test his reactions, she wondered if she shouldn't be examining the mother as well. So far, this appeared to be a very disturbing case.

"Any history of epilepsy in your family?" she asked, clicking off the penlight.

"No," answered Heather quietly.

Dr. Hefner heard Heather but was silent. She had turned to the X rays of Dylan's brain and skull glowing from the lightbox on the wall.

"Diabetes?" she finally asked.

Heather shook her head. "No."

"Was there any trigger event? A trauma, shock, or . . . ?" Dr. Hefner thought she noticed a tremor in the other woman. Was the mother hiding something? That was common, especially in abuse cases. However, she didn't currently suspect abuse. But that didn't mean the child's mother wasn't being less than forthcoming.

What initially puzzled Dr. Hefner was the lack of a physiological explanation for the boy's condition. It immediately raised certain suspicions, ones for which she at first had no basis. Then a technician had referred to Dylan's mother as "that *Elm Street* chick." So, she was the star of those Freddy Krueger movies, huh? Well, that was an interesting twist. Dr. Hefner hadn't seen those particular movies, but she had a pretty good idea what they were like. Dylan's condition fit into a theory she had. One that was shared by a great many eminent child psychologists. She now turned her analytical gaze toward Heather.

"You haven't shown him any of the films you make, have you? The horror stuff?"

"No," Heather answered once more.

"Good," said Dr. Hefner tersely. She was convinced Heather was lying. Perhaps she didn't think the question was relevant. Oh it is. And Dr. Christine Hefner aimed to make this parent understand. "I'm convinced those films can tip an unstable child over the edge," she said with the haughty air of authority.

“Unstable? Dylan’s not unstable. He’s . . . he’s just . . . upset,” Heather stammered.

Denial, thought Dr. Hefner. It’s to be expected. Now seemed to be a bad time for cold, hard truths. Well, there will be time for that. This child isn’t going anywhere for the time being. She picked up a prescription pad and scribbled on it as she worked her expression into something the boy’s mother would find reassuring. Only a thin smile appeared.

“We’ll run a battery of tests and know in a few days.”

“Does he have to stay here overnight?” Heather asked. Panic seemed to rise from her like steam. She obviously didn’t want to leave her son, thought Dr. Hefner. But it may be the best thing for him.

“Absolutely,” Dr. Hefner replied, daring her to suggest otherwise. She didn’t, and her panicked expression was replaced by a look of resignation. But Dr. Hefner was not quite satisfied. Not yet. With a nod, she motioned Heather out of the room so they could speak without Dylan hearing.

Once in the hallway, the doctor held Heather’s eye in a level gaze. “Anything more happen we should know about?” It was phrased as a question, but meant as a command. Stop holding out, she was saying.

“Like what?” is all she got for a reply. Her manner had become guarded. Too guarded.

“Sometimes what a child says or fantasizes will give a clue to what ails him.” Dr. Hefner decided not to push too hard just yet. She only had suspicions, no proof. If the tests came back positive, then she’d stop pussyfooting around. “Did he say anything while he was still lucid?”

Before she answered, Heather turned toward the doorway and looked in on Dylan. Dr. Hefner noticed the boy had now turned and was facing them. His eyes were begging his mother to make everything all right. Or was he asking her not to say something in particular? the doctor wondered.

“No,” Heather told her. “He didn’t say anything.” Then Heather turned away and went back into Dylan’s room.

Dr. Hefner watched suspiciously as Heather closed the door behind her. She had the feeling this case was going to take a few twists and turns before they were through.

One of her nurses arrived moments later with some early test results. She waved them at the doctor and asked, “What do we have here?”

Putting her finger to her lips, Dr. Hefner answered in a low voice. “It’s too soon to know for sure, but the early symptoms point toward

childhood schizophrenia." Dr. Hefner was perversely thrilled at the prospect. It would be her first such case. And if the mother was as unstable as she appeared, there could be a heredity angle as well.

Heather's hand froze on the doorknob without turning it. She had been about to ask Dr. Hefner a few questions of her own when she heard the voices in the hallway. She had returned to the room mainly to break free of the doctor's probing gaze. Her spirit sank when Dr. Hefner gave the nurse her opinion. This could dangerously complicate matters. If she persisted in her beliefs, the doctor would no doubt try to keep Dylan from her. But with Dylan's present condition, she knew that fighting the doctor would be futile. She had to find a way to get him out of here. But first he had to return from wherever he was hiding.

She returned to the bed and sat beside Dylan, holding him to her. His eyes were blank and unseeing.

"Dylan? Can you hear me?" she whispered. Then, with the barest minimum of movement, he shook his head. "Dylan, you've got to fight it, whatever it is that's after you. And you've got to come back to me. You can't make it alone." And neither can I, she thought. "Do you hear?"

He didn't respond. She thought she had lost him. Then a single tear tumbled down his cheek and he nodded yes. Heather spoke quickly so he wouldn't go away.

"Yes. And if you can hear me, you can tell me what you need to feel safe."

Again, no response. No nods. No tears. But something moved underneath his covers. His hand was reaching toward the foot of the bed. But nothing was there. And that was the problem, she realized.

"Rex . . . is that what you want? Rex is home, Dylan. That's where you should be, too." Finally, a goal he could work toward. "You've got to get better so they'll let you come home, understand?"

"Home," Dylan said very quietly.

"Home. That's right." It was working. "That's where I want you, Dylan. You know, we're not that far. Right out there past the freeway is our home." She pointed out the window and turned Dylan so he could see. Another tear fell down his cheek. "But to get there, you've got to come out from where you are. Then they'll let you come back home to Rex. And to me." She was crying now, herself. She kissed him on the forehead and hugged him close.

Moments later the door opened and a nurse entered, carrying a paper cup.

“Time for your medicine, cowboy,” she said with professional cheer. Dylan’s serious eyes locked on the paper cup.

“What is that?” asked Heather. She remembered Dr. Hefner writing on a prescription pad.

“Just something to help him sleep,” the nurse replied quietly, and offered a pill to Dylan. He looked up at Heather, unsure. She thought he looked a thousand years old at the moment and the sight nearly started her crying again. Instead, she nodded that it was all right and he put it in his mouth. The nurse gave him the cup of water and he swallowed.

“Attaboy. Now take a little nap,” the nurse said. Then she turned to Heather and in a low, polite voice told her, “You’ll have to leave now. He’ll be fine. We’ll run tests tonight. You can visit again in the morning.”

Heather resigned herself to leaving. It was now up to Dylan to recover so she could get him out of here. In the meantime, there were things she needed to do. See Robert, for one. She kissed Dylan once more.

“Okay, Dylan. I’ll be back here first thing tomorrow. I love you.” More than anything, she said to herself. Dylan’s eyes began to close as the nurse saw her out of the room.

As soon as he was alone, Dylan’s eyes popped open. He brought his hand to his mouth and spit the pill into his palm. Soon it was hidden deep in his covers.

Sleep was dangerous, he knew. Look what happened to Rex the other day. He also understood how important it was for the adults to think he was asleep. Sometimes it was so they could have time to themselves, like Mommy needed after coming home from the park yesterday. Now it was so they would think he was getting better. The mean man wouldn’t let him get well if Dylan slept. So he just turned on his side, his back to the door, and stared out the window. Toward his home.

By the time Heather made it to her car, she became lost in her maze of thoughts. She backed out, not seeing the car behind her until a horn blared, breaking her trance. The driver hurled curses at her and sped out of Heather’s path. She pulled back into the space and killed the engine.

All the pain and confusion she’d been holding in welled up in her all at once. Sobbing heavily, she draped herself over the steering wheel. It all came out. After several long minutes, she was able to breathe

again. She wiped away the tears, and the sorrow and the fear were both gone, replaced by anger. Swearing to herself, she started the car and carefully pulled out of her spot.

On the road, a deep yawn made her realize how tired she was. This was no time for sleep, she thought, and pulled into the nearest convenience store for some coffee. It was hot and bitter and strong. Just the thing to keep her awake. For good measure, she turned on the radio. Loud. The news came on at the top of the hour.

"Seismologists at Caltech have counted over three hundred of the temblors so far," read the announcer. "Though most were too faint for us to feel, seven have shaken our community in the last two weeks. And now scientists are speculating there might be an unknown fault running beneath Los Angeles, one that could—"

She snapped it off. That was enough of *that.* Then she remembered her appointment with Robert. She picked up the car phone and dialed.

"Robert?" asked Patrice Englund, snatching up the phone before it completed the first ring. Please be my husband, she prayed. It wasn't.

"This is Heather, Patrice. I was calling for Robert. He's not there?"

She dropped the suitcase she was carrying. Her shoulders sagged. It was posture that was unbefitting a woman with the elegant beauty and bearing of a European runway model, but right now there was no one to see her. Robert left this morning without waking her and had not returned.

"He's . . . out of the house, Heather." No need to worry Heather. No doubt she had her own problems right about now.

"Will he be back anytime soon?"

She wanted to cry into the phone that she didn't know where Robert was or why he had left. But that wouldn't do. Not at all. She picked up the suitcase again and carried it to the foyer. Two others sat there, waiting.

"Uh . . . actually, we're ducking out of town for a while." Placing the one suitcase beside the others, Patrice stalked into Robert's studio.

"And you should get away, too, Heather. You really should." If she emphasized the point any more, Heather would become suspicious. She had to get off the phone, Robert might be calling. They had call waiting, but what if, just this once, the damn thing wasn't working?

"Just a little break from L.A.," Patrice told her as she picked up Robert's glasses—he never left the house without his glasses!—and turned. Suddenly, she was face-to-face with the painting. It was finished now, and her husband was gone.

"We could all use a break right about now, don't you think?" Then

she hung up on Heather. She couldn't carry on a conversation in the presence of the painting. But she couldn't walk away from it, either.

From the canvas glared the image of Freddy Krueger. But this was no self-portrait, she knew. This Freddy was dark and powerful, and utterly evil. And the Claw was no makeshift weapon. The blades grew right out from the end of the creature's arm. She had seen the Claw before. In her dreams. So had Robert. At first he had considered the painting a type of exorcism. That illusion began to fade as the portrait neared completion. He realized he had been misled and had somehow contributed to the thing's power instead. Whatever it was. Whatever it wanted. Leaving town seemed like the only solution, though Patrice privately wondered how they could escape something that resided in their dreams.

Talking to Patrice revived the sense of dread she had gotten from Robert, only tenfold. She considered calling back but decided against it. Patrice was obviously frightened, and at the moment, Heather didn't see what they could do for each other. Right now it was time to go to the one person who might be able to shed some light on the situation—and help them all.

As expected, Wes did not answer his phone. She drove to his house, anyway, knowing he'd see her if he was there. When she arrived at his home above Malibu, she should have been impressed by the ocean view on such a clear day, but today she didn't notice. Wes was home and let her in immediately. His manner was vague. It wasn't clear if he knew what was going on in the world outside. She didn't hit him with it all at once, and first asked about the script.

"I wish I could tell you where this script is going. I don't know," he said. They walked together, his long strides causing her almost to have to run to keep up. "Look, I dream a scene, I write it down next morning. Your guess is as good as mine as to how it ends."

He ducked quickly inside his house, as if trying to dodge her.

"Well, at least tell me what it's about," she insisted. Then she saw why Wes had stepped inside. The housekeeper stood waiting with coffee for her. Heather took the cup and drank immediately, ignoring how the coffee burned her throat. Wes waited until the housekeeper left to answer Heather's question.

"I can tell you what the nightmares are about. They're about this . . . entity." He seemed unsatisfied with the word. "Whatever you want to call it, it's old, very old. And it's taken different forms in different times. The only thing that stays the same about it is what it lives for."

"What's that?" asked Heather, not wanting to hear the answer

despite her need to know.

“Killing innocence, one way or the other.”

“This is still a script we’re talking about, right?” By the look in his eyes, it wasn’t that simple.

“I think of it as sort of a nightmare in progress.” His eyes turned flat and unreflecting again. His expression was unreadable.

“Then, in this nightmare in progress, does this thing have any weaknesses?” Even if he considered this hypothetical, his theories could still help her.

“It can be captured,” Wes answered. “Sometimes.”

“Captured? How?”

“By storytellers, of all things.” He stopped, waiting, it seemed, for her to dismiss the explanation. She didn’t. Heather wanted to hear anything he had to say. He settled into the speech, the storyteller in him coming to the fore. “Every so often, they imagine a story good enough to catch its essence. Then it’s held prisoner for a while. In the story.” He shrugged as if doubting she’d understand.

“Like the genie in the bottle,” mused Heather, grappling with the concept.

“Exactly,” he said, pleased she was following. Then his face darkened considerably. “The problem comes when the story dies. It happens a lot of different ways—the story gets too familiar, or too watered down by people trying to make it easier to sell.”

The progression of the *Elm Street* movies and the character of Freddy in particular came to mind. Henny Youngman with a claw.

“Or it’s labeled a threat to society and just plain banned. However it happens, when the story dies, the evil is set free.”

So if what he’s saying is true . . . Her jaw must have fallen open, because Wes gave her an odd look.

“You’re saying Freddy’s this ancient thing?” she asked. She felt like a sky diver tugging desperately at a defective parachute cord.

“Current version,” Wes replied. “For ten years, he’s been imprisoned as Freddy by the story of ‘A Nightmare on Elm Street.’ But now that the films have stopped . . .” His voice trailed off as he tried to find the right words. Heather herself had said them. “The genie’s out of the bottle, Heather. That’s what the nightmares are about. That’s what I’m writing.”

Heather looked at him, the fear rising. In her mind, she could see the ground rushing up at her. The complicated expression returned to Wes’s face. But maybe there was hope in what he was saying. If this was a cyclical occurrence, maybe it disappears at the end of its given cycle.

“If Freddy’s loose, I mean, in your script, where’s he going to go? Another age? Another form?”

“That’s not what the dreams say he’s doing.” Still no chute.

“Then what *is* he doing?”

“Well, see, he’s gotten used to being Freddy now.” He should have sounded glib. But his tone was serious. “And he kinda likes it here in our time and space, too. So . . . he’s trying to cross over, from film into our reality.”

He wants to come into our world, Dylan had said of the mean man who was much more than just Freddy.

“Isn’t there anyone who can stop him?” She was on the verge of panic, and wasn’t speaking hypothetically anymore. Chase’s death hadn’t been just a sad story. Her nightmares weren’t scenes in a movie. Dylan was her son, not some fictional character.

Wes regarded her carefully before he began to answer.

“Interestingly enough,” he said carefully, “in the dreams, there is one person—a gatekeeper, so to speak—someone Freddy’s got to get by before he can enter our world.

“It’s you, Heather.”

Her mind-diver hit bottom. She almost blacked out but wouldn’t let herself go.

“Me? Why me?”

“Dramatically speaking, it makes perfect sense.” He still seemed to think they were talking about the script. It was infuriating. “You played Nancy, after all. The first to humiliate and defeat him.”

“That was Nancy, not me!” She was almost yelling now.

“But it was you that gave Nancy her strength. So to get out, he has to come through you. And it’s inevitable that he’ll hit you at your most vulnerable points.” His voice betrayed him now.

“Dylan. And . . .” She stared at Wes in shock. “Chase. My God, Wes, did you know?”

“Heather, it’s just a movie. A dream, really.” Now she saw he was rationalizing the entire situation.

“You know damn well it’s more than that now!” she spat at him. Her first instinct was to grab him by the shoulders—no matter that he was a good foot taller than her—and shake him until he realized what his denial had cost her. Maybe later she would, but for now they had to figure out what to do. Together.

“How can we stop him?” she asked in a calmer voice.

He hung his head slightly, finally admitting her pain. Then he led her to his studio. Heavy drapes kept out light from the windows. A

computer sat on a table in the center of the room. On its screen glowed a half-finished page from the script. The only other furnishing in the room was a narrow cot, on which sat a pile of twisted sheets. His weakness gone, Wes spoke now with determination.

“The way to stop him is to make another movie. And I swear to you I’ll stay at my computer and keep writing until I finish the script.” Then he lowered his voice, as if afraid to say what would follow. “But when that time comes, you’re gonna have to make a choice.”

Heather didn’t like the look in his eyes. “Choice? What kind of choice?”

“Whether or not you’re willing to play Nancy one last time.” He was dead serious. And she realized he was right.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
June 17, 1994

It happened again this week. Twice.

The first time, my other foot got slashed and I found no hidden aluminum tab to explain it away. The dream in which it happened was much like the last one. I was scrambling through some sort of opening when Freddy grabbed my foot. As I pulled away, a blade slashed open my shoe and cut me. Only this time the shoe was on the other foot.

Or something like that.

The one I had last night was different. The bastard was toying with me. Feinting, jabbing with his blades, seeing if I would flinch. I had to, or I would have lost, in rapid succession, fingers, toes, ears, both eyes, and other vital organs. I stumbled and fell at one point, and Freddy stood over me. Never have I been looked upon with greater malevolence. Then he just reached down, not smiling so much as scowling, and like a surgeon gave me two quick cuts on each hand. It hurt so much I woke up screaming—and found my palms bleeding from X-shaped wounds.

If it was closer to Easter, I'd say I had stigmata. I can joke about it now because I've had a few days to deal with that experience. Right now my biggest pain is the sunburn I got at the beach. I'm way behind schedule with the book, but I couldn't have typed with injured hands, anyway. Come to think of it, Freddy said something to that effect in my dream. Laurel called to check in with me and I told her it wasn't ready yet, but soon. She seemed a little unhappy but didn't press it.

I didn't want to tell her about the nightmares and the cuts. She'd think I was making excuses—or that I was starting to lose my grip. Either could lead to me getting fired. Problem is, I think it might be just what my subconscious wants to happen.

In a modern miracle of passive-aggressive

thinking, my mind might be looking for excuses to get out of writing the book. Because finishing it would bring the risk of finding out the publishers hate it. Well, as every neurotic knows, the best way to avoid failure is to avoid doing. But I already started. So it would be more convenient for some outside force to prevent me from completing the book. I should have gotten the clue when I flashed on the idea of there being a curse. That's unsettling stuff, and enough to make you question your involvement in something—*if* you're the superstitious type, which I am not. So the nightmares began. (Or maybe they were happening, anyway, I'm not sure.) Now I've got Freddy slashing me in my dreams and bleeding wounds when I wake up. Just like in the movies. But unlike the movies, this *can't* be happening in real life.

Maybe I'm just having a lucid moment, but there is no way Freddy Krueger is real and no way anyone's responsible for those cuts except for me. Maybe I'm sleep-mutilating myself. Okay, so that means I *am* crazy and need some serious help. Well, so be it. I'll look into it—right after I finish the book. If anyone thought that I was even the slightest bit unstable—and thus unreliable—that would accomplish the goals of my cowardly inner self. Hopefully, admitting to myself that I've got a problem will stem it before it gets any worse. Then, when the time is right, I'll deal with it. Maybe the problem will go away by itself when I'm done with the book.

It could happen.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
June 19, 1994

In physics, as a theoretical moving body approaches the speed of light, time begins to slow. Applied to psychology, this probably explains why survivors of car accidents seem to perceive them in slow motion. Thoughts race through the mind and, because of their urgency, are able to be processed as a speed approaching that of the event being witnessed, the

speed of the event in this case analogous to the speed of light. Each moment then attains a clarity that normal moments lack.

When the theoretical moving body attains the speed of light, time stops and then seems to flow backward if the object exceeds that velocity. Time never flows backward in an accident. The mind may race ahead to its inevitable conclusion—usually an abrupt impact resulting in pain and severe injury—but thoughts cannot induce time to reverse itself and allow the victim-to-be any control over events to change that conclusion.

Theoretically, there is only one point at which time may be perceived to stop. That is called death.

6

While Wes wrote, Heather worked on getting her son out of the hospital. Under the circumstances, Dr. Hefner wasn't about to release Dylan. She was on the trail of an exciting diagnosis—childhood schizophrenia—and seemed ready to do everything in her power to hold on to her patient. Heather meant to head the doctor off at the pass. Unfortunately, she had no ammo to fight with, so she went to the library to learn what she could about the disorder. She hoped research might turn up something that even Dr. Hefner was overlooking in her zeal.

The tremendous volume of material on the subject was overwhelming at first. The librarian had to help her narrow it down. Finally, she left the library with an armload of reference books, magazine clippings, xeroxes of important articles, and more. The information swarmed her table at dinner and covered her bed when she went upstairs for the night.

Another item followed Heather wherever she went: her coffeemaker. There would be no sleep until Dylan was home and Wes finished the script. As long as she kept awake, she was safe. And when Dylan came home, he'd be safe, too.

The clock read 12:30 A.M. when she looked at it for the second time. The first time it had read 7:30 P.M. Turning back to the page of the book she was reading, Heather picked up where she left off. Her finger traced each line of each complex paragraph. The language was technical and hard to read, but she forced herself to understand every word. Or to read it over until she did.

Heather glanced at the yellow legal pad beside her. A pattern was forming in her scrawled notes, but it wasn't the one she was looking for. Then she looked back to the text and read, "incipience of aphasia commonly preceded by periods of acute irritability," "delusional accounts of shadow figures . . . hearing of voices . . . seizures, nausea, and emesis . . ." Though the phrases came to her in fragments, their overall meaning was burning itself into her mind. This had all happened to Dylan. And they were all symptoms of schizophrenia.

No wonder the doctor had come to that conclusion. And in a moment of panic, Heather thought that maybe the doctor was right. She leaned back and let go of the book. Caffeine and confusion mingled. Had she spoken to Wes today? Maybe they were both off their rockers.

No! she shouted to herself. This is happening. You just haven't gone far enough yet. Keep pushing. For Dylan's sake. For Chase. She suddenly realized that her strong inner voice had returned. But it was too late to tell whether the fearful voice was truly gone, or had merely gone temporarily hoarse from overuse.

When she returned to the book, her place was lost, but only momentarily. Soon she was back on track, but without much hope. She read, each word sinking her deeper into despair. Then she found it. Right there on the page headed "Sleep Disorders": "Many of the symptoms of schizophrenia are duplicated in children suffering from sleep deprivation."

She looked again at the words "sleep deprivation." Of course. Dylan had probably kept himself from falling asleep to escape the mean man. But without coffee, he had only been partially successful. He was a little kid, after all, and intense fear tends to shut the body down as often as it revs it up. When he had fallen asleep—because he was too tired to fight it, or because he thought he was safe—he had been vulnerable to attack. Now she had something to bring to Dr. Hefner. But would it be enough to make the doctor give her son back?

That was for tomorrow. If they both could get through the night, she'd take care of it then. She hoped Wes was making progress, but he had told her it could be slow going. He couldn't make the dreams come.

She reached for the cup of coffee at her bedside table. A strange feeling came over her and she stopped her hand just inches away. Heather looked at the cup. Small concentric rings were emanating from the center of its black surface. They became more pronounced until the coffee began to slosh over the edge of the cup. She braced herself for the coming earthquake.

A distinct, low rumble had started and was growing. This was a new kind of quake, coming on slowly rather than hitting all at once. She looked around the room, waiting for it to take off. Then she heard a tiny *ping* and realized her bedroom television had turned itself on. The screen buzzed as a picture faded onto the screen, sound coming with it. A news report was showing devastation from the recent earthquakes.

"A six-point quake on the Richer scale," a newscaster was reading, "bringing scattered destruction throughout the L.A. Basin." Images of walls fallen onto cars, broken windows, and crumbled freeway overpasses paraded by until she found the remote. She pointed and zapped. The television blinked off.

The low rumbling of the earthquake continued. She wondered if it would get any worse. Then the television blinked back on. A picture

leaped to the screen immediately. She raised the remote to turn it off again when she saw pictures of Terry and Chuck. The newscaster looked up from the copy and seemed to be talking specifically to her.

"The world of horror films suffered its own terror today, as two of Hollywood's best-known special-effects technicians were found dead in a vacant field."

Between the photos of Terry and Chuck was a logo in the design of Freddy's claw, with the words REAL-LIFE HORROR. Heather covered her mouth to stifle a cry.

"Terrance Feinstein and Charles Wilson," the announcer continued, "two special-effects artists reputedly working on a top-secret project for the makers of the Freddy Krueger films, were found brutally slashed to death early this—"

Heather turned it off, unable to watch any more. She had forgotten that Terry and Chuck had been missing the day she called Chase. The day he had died. It never crossed her mind that they hadn't been at the funeral. Freddy had murdered them as well.

The television popped on again as the newscast was just ending.

"Freddy's glove was missing, and police are speculating whether the murders were the result of a botched theft of—"

An electronic crackling came from within the television. The picture scrambled, became snow, then blacked out completely. Something inside popped, and a bluish flare lit the screen momentarily. Then nothing, just a thin wisp of smoke rising from the back. Heather pressed herself back against her bed, afraid it might yet explode. The silence was broken by the telephone ringing.

Heather looked at her clock again. It was almost 1:00 A.M. Who would be calling at this hour? Unless it was him.

She would not answer the phone. It continued to ring until her answering machine picked it up. Instead of Freddy, Sara Risher's voice echoed through the empty house. She sounded upset.

"Heather? This is Sara. Um, sorry to call so late, but . . . this is kinda hard . . . I don't know if you've seen the news, but . . . we are thinking we might shelve this new *Nightmare* project for a while, and wanted you to know. Call. Bye."

Sara hung up, and moments later the answering machine turned off with a click. The rumbling had stopped and there was only silence.

Leaning back against her pillows, Heather took a deep breath. That was bad. Wes was writing the script and she was now willing to make it, but if New Line was shelving the movie . . . All of the evening's information began to spin slow circles in her mind. Her head drooped to the side. Heather felt sleep coming but welcomed it. Tomorrow

would arrive that much sooner.

Something crashed in the kitchen, but at first she didn't react. Than another crash, louder. Plates were falling off shelves. She leaped out of bed just as the full force of the earthquake hit. Bracing herself in the doorway, she could hear objects toppling over and breaking all over the house. This was the worst quake by far. The bedside lamp was thrown to the floor, smashing the bulb, plunging the room into darkness.

The shaking stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Silence again enveloped the room. Heather still did not move from the doorway. Seconds passed while she waited for the aftershock. Then the sound of breaking glass came from her closet and she braced herself once more. Nothing happened. She approached the closet door tentatively.

What the hell is in there? she wondered. Only shoes and clothing were stored in the closet. There should be nothing breakable. She opened the closet door and at her feet lay the shattered remains of the coffeepot. She looked back at the table where the coffeepot had been. It was no longer there.

A small noise came from the closet and she turned back around—and found herself looking into the scarred, horrible face of Freddy. His eyes glinted in the scant light with immense hatred and menace. She screamed as he leaped at her, forcing her backward onto the bed. He was on her now, his very real weight pinning her down. Heather was helpless and they both knew it. As he cocked the Claw for the killing blow, Freddy pressed his burned face into hers.

"Naaaannnnccccyy!" he hissed.

He drove the Claw down with incredible force—just as the aftershock hit. The bed heaved beneath Heather, throwing her to the side at the last possible moment. The blades narrowly missed her throat and glanced off her arm just as she was tossed from the bed. Her head struck the dresser, and the brightest light exploded in her mind. Then it winked out.

After great effort, Heather crawled up from the deep pit inside her consciousness. When she got to the top, she was awake again. At first it seemed nothing was wrong. Her lamp stood where it had been, unbroken. The coffeepot was intact. Only her mattress was at an odd angle on her bed. And of course, she was on the floor.

She started to pull herself off the floor, pain trying to drive her back down the pit at every movement. The bedside clock blinked "12:00 . . . 12:00." Quake must've knocked out the power, too, she thought. It wasn't until she was standing again that she realized she was bleeding.

Blood oozed from four long slashes in her forearm.

Then she remembered.

"Dylan!" she yelled to no one. Ignoring her aching body, she hurried to the car.

Fax Cover Sheet

TO: Dave Bergantino

COMPANY: Cooped Up At Home, Inc.

FAX NO.: (818) 753-4475

DATE: June 22, 1994

FROM: Katrina

NO. OF PAGES (INCLUDING THIS ONE): 2

COMMENTS:

Hey Dave!

Found this article in an old Daily Variety. Oooooooo . . . scary stuff! (Ha ha)

Anyway, thought you'd want it for inspiration. Hope the writing is going well. Haven't heard from you in a while. Call me so we can go dancing, okay?

Oh yeah and watch out for Freddy!

Pleasant dreams,

Katrina

Daily Variety
March 15, 1993
Page 3

EFX TEX KILLED

By Raymond Fenley

The film world was rocked today by yet another tragic loss as the bodies of two special-effects technicians were found in a vacant lot near Palmdale. Thomas Ferrenz and Carlos Wendigo had been teamed to work on a new "Nightmare on Elm Street" film for New Line Cinema.

Slashed

In a sinister twist, both men had been slashed to death with what were presumed to be knives in the manner of screen villain Freddy Krueger. The two were working on an updated version of the infamous glove for the new movie. The prop was missing from the crime scene. Police suspect theft was the motive.

Curse?

This was the second tragic incident in the production of what was supposed to be a top-secret project. The secret was revealed when Chase Porter, boss of Ferrenz and Wendigo, died in a car accident three days ago when returning from Palmdale.

His death, along with those of his crew, has fueled rumors of a curse on the set of the new movie.

"It's like someone, God, maybe, doesn't want this movie made," one member of the production said anonymously.

Film Itself Next to Die

Daily Variety has learned the project is indeed on the ropes. New Line executives are said to be "examining the film's potential" after signs the franchise may have run out of steam. No one at the indie consented to be interviewed for this article.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
June 22, 1994

Okay, even though Craven changed the names, it’s obvious that these guys are Chuck and Terry in the movie. Heck, he didn’t even try that hard to hide it, since he used the same initials. On the other hand, who else would have a reason to search all this stuff out and put together the pieces?

And why did I have to be the lucky one?

Still fighting the urge to just ditch this book and write some innocuous fairy tale. The kind that doesn’t come with any bizarre coincidences attached and doesn’t mess with your mind.

But then, if I quit this, I’ll be lucky to get a job writing for fortune cookies.

* * *

When she got to the hospital, Heather ran through the hallways to Dylan’s room. As she approached, two figures stood just outside his door. One was a nurse. The other was Julie.

“Julie? What’re you doing here?” Heather asked.

Her friend just shrugged, almost embarrassed.

“I don’t know. I just—had this terrible dream, that Dylan was in danger.” She stopped and looked down, as if deciding whether to go on. “I had to come over.” Then she laughed nervously and looked up. “You must think I’m crazy.”

Heather shook her head humorlessly. “No, I don’t think that at all. How is he?”

“They wouldn’t let me—” Julie said when something caught her eye over Heather’s shoulder. Heather turned to find Dr. Hefner regarding her with a pained smile.

“Ms. Langenkamp—I’m afraid there are no evening visiting hours in intensive care.” As she spoke, she placed herself between Heather and Dylan’s door. Her tone sounded like she had just caught Heather doing something naughty. Heather ignored it.

“Is he all right?”

“Dylan? He’s holding well,” the doctor told her evenly. “Earlier, he had some problems,” she added, sounding unconcerned. “He’s in an oxygen tent now.”

“Oh my God!” Heather instantly forgot Dr. Hefner even existed—until she found the doctor blocking the door to Dylan’s room. She didn’t look like she was going to move.

“It seems we’ve had an accident, Ms. Langenkamp.” The doctor had grabbed her gently but firmly by the injured arm. “May I?”

Without waiting for a response, Dr. Hefner pulled back Heather’s sleeve, uncovering the slash wounds. Heather tried to pull away, but the doctor held tight. “These are nasty cuts. How—?”

Heather cut in. She didn’t have time for this. “It happened during the earthquake. I fell.” She hoped Dr. Hefner would be satisfied, but it was clear she was not. Too bad. Heather pushed forward again. “I want to see Dylan.” But the doctor still did not move.

“In a moment. First let’s see about you.” She locked Heather in her steely gaze once more. Again, it seemed Heather had no choice. She nodded slightly, assenting to be led away. Before she went with Dr. Hefner, she glanced at Julie, silently pleading with her to stay put. Julie winked back at her, message received.

In the dispensary, Dr. Hefner tended to Heather's cuts. She wanted to be with Dylan, but she had to be careful of this woman. The look in her eyes said she was dangerous. Her eyes also said she thought Heather was dangerous.

"If these had been a few inches nearer the wrist," said Dr. Hefner rhetorically as she cleansed the wound with antiseptic. Then, a little too casually, she asked, "What did you say you cut yourself on?"

I didn't. And I'm not going to.

"It was an earthquake and it was dark," Heather answered tersely. "I have no idea."

"These look quite fresh."

Heather was losing patience. "They are," she snapped. "It happened in tonight's quake." Dr. Hefner frowned, obviously not understanding. "It happened just fifteen minutes ago. You *must* have felt it." But Dr. Hefner had not.

"Guess we lucked out over here," she said with her thin-lipped smile. Heather was being humored. Of course, the doctor hadn't felt the quake. It had happened in Heather's dream, where she got the cuts. But she couldn't tell Dr. Hefner that.

"Your son, apparently, is terrified of a man. Someone he thinks is going to come out of his bed." Dr. Hefner studied her for a reaction. Heather gave her nothing. "One of the nurses heard him talking in his sleep." Then she moved in as she bandaged the wound. "You have any idea who that man might be, Ms. Langenkamp?" For emphasis, she bound the gauze tightly with a clip.

Heather winced. The doctor's words made her realize one important thing she had forgotten.

"I meant to bring him his dinosaur, Rex. Rex keeps Freddy from—" She stopped, but it was too late. Dr. Hefner's eyes flared darkly triumphant.

"The man from your films? Freddy Krueger with the claws? Is that who he's afraid of?" Her eyes flicked briefly to the bandage on Heather's arm. Then she turned on Heather with her arresting gaze. "You *have* let your child see your films, haven't you?"

Heather stood and faced Dr. Hefner. I'm not gonna take much more of this shit, she thought. What's happening is a lot more serious than your academic notions of child psychology. She glared at Dr. Hefner.

"Every kid knows about Freddy," she hissed. "He's like Santa Claus or King Kong."

Dr. Hefner stepped back as if she thought Heather would attack her, and this time she was the first to look away. When she looked back again, her more generic, less threatening professional manner had

returned.

"I see. Well. Interesting talking to you, Ms. Langenkamp." Dr. Hefner was a bit flustered by this encounter. "I hope you understand, my concerns are simply for the welfare of your son." She left the room with one last flash of her thin smile.

Heather understood instantly that this was only a strategic retreat on Dr. Hefner's part. She was merely going off to plan her next move. In the meantime, Heather was going to be with Dylan, planning *their* next move. When she returned to his room, the nurse was still standing guard, keeping Julie out. Heather walked to the door and the nurse immediately stepped aside. Apparently, her expression told the nurse it would be in her best interests to let her in to see her son. However, the nurse kept the door open so she could keep watch.

Dylan was barely visible through the oxygen tent. What she could see was a frail, tortured child who most definitely wasn't schizophrenic. She wanted to take his hand and hold it through the tent, but resisted. It might not be good for Dylan, and the nurse might mistake the gesture in any event. It seemed like a paranoid thought, but the way Dr. Hefner was acting, it was better to be safe. Being close to him had to be enough for now.

She leaned on the rail at the side of the bed. Really, there was nothing she could do until he woke up. He wasn't anywhere she could go and bring him back. So she would have to keep watch. Meanwhile, the nurse was keeping watch on her. Another nurse walked by and the two exchanged suspicious whispers as they glanced in her direction. Heather didn't feel particularly bothered by them. They were only doing their job. And she was doing hers, as a mother, and that took precedence.

Soon, however, Heather found herself nodding. Her head dropped forward and she jerked it up again. Luckily, she'd only drifted off for a moment.

Suddenly, the monitor above Dylan gave off a shrill alarm. Jagged lines danced on a small screen. Dylan twisted inside the tent. Then he convulsed, his back arching and slamming into the bed like he was experiencing cardiac arrest. She jumped up and started screaming for help—

—and her own screaming woke her up. She was on her feet as nurses rushed into the room, wondering what was going on. Heather looked at them and clamped her hand over her mouth. The room was quiet now. No alarm from the machine. Just a soft beeping that indicated everything was all right. She turned back to the tent and saw that Dylan was sitting up, staring at her through the plastic. He reached up and slowly unzipped the tent, revealing a cold, harsh

expression that was utterly unlike him. Heather had started to lean down to him when she saw his face and froze. Then she realized he was leaning out of his tent.

"Dylan, honey—you shouldn't do that," she said, and started to reach for him.

His face made her stop a second time. But it was no longer *his* face. His features shifted into an uncanny imitation of a twisted old man.

"Too late." Freddy's voice boomed out of Dylan's mouth. "I'm almost there, Heather. Almost there."

With that, his entire body contracted and he vomited, black-green muck showering her. The feeling on her skin was like battery acid. As she fell back, trying to wipe away the stinging globs that clung to her, she glimpsed insects and worms writhing in her hair. She was choking in disgust when a strong arm pulled her back and flung her out of the way.

Emergency machinery and nurses flew by, converging on Dylan's bed. They obscured her view of him, but she could hear him crying now. It was his own voice and he was terrified. She tried to crowd in with the nurses. Her son was calling for her.

Dr. Hefner appeared at the door. She strode in with grim determination on her face and roughly shoved the nurses away from Dylan's bed. Heather reached up to get the doctor's attention.

"Doctor—"

Dr. Hefner turned on her like a rabid dog and glared. Heather shrank back. Then the doctor turned to the nurses and yelled. She was acting like a woman possessed.

"Get her back! I've got to go in. Get me a full anesthetic, STAT!"

"We don't have any here, Doctor," said one of the nurses meekly. She, too, was devastated by one of Dr. Hefner's incendiary glares. Then the doctor wheeled around to see Dylan. He was desperately clawing at the oxygen tent. It fell away and he reached out for his mother.

"Screw it, then," bellowed Dr. Hefner. "I'm going in!" She reached forward as if to push Dylan back into the bed, but instead, savagely tore the hospital gown from him.

"Cut this evil *out* of him!"

As she roared, she thrust her right hand into her medical bag, then withdrew it. Instead of her hand, she pulled out the Claw. Customized for this medical nightmare, the razors were replaced by deadly scalpels. The crazed Dr. Hefner raised the Claw, preparing to plunge them into Dylan's chest. Heather dived forward—

—and landed on Dylan's empty bed. Hands grabbed at her and she

struggled against them. Finally, she was roughly flipped onto her back. She stared up at several nurses who had been trying to subdue her. Their faces were tangled in long, translucent strips. They seemed as startled as she was. She went limp, realizing that she had been dreaming, and they released her.

"Now what have you done to yourself, miss?" said one nurse.

Heather looked down at her arm to find blood seeping from under the bandage. As she reached to touch it, she realized what the translucent strips were. She sat up so quickly, the nurses jumped back in surprise. Heather stepped away from the bed and turned. Dylan's oxygen tent was shredded. She turned to the nurses with wild eyes.

"He's got him!" she screamed. "He's got my Dylan!"

The nurses came forward to subdue her again but stopped in their tracks. They eyed her in shock. Heather glimpsed herself in the mirror above the hospital room sink. A gray streak had appeared in her hair.

The nurses recovered from the shock and began to move toward her again. They were tense, preparing for a struggle. Heather could see that they thought she was insane, and dangerously so.

But she didn't care.

"Who—who's got him?" asked one nurse.

"Freddy," Heather said in a low clear voice. This stopped the nurses again.

"Freddy?" asked another. Apparently, she thought this was a tension-breaker, because she started laughing. "Who, Freddy Krueger or something?"

Dr. Hefner—the real one, Heather was certain—entered at that moment. She assessed the situation and pasted on her professional manner. It seemed ready to fall off at any moment. She asked what the problem was.

"My baby!" Heather pleaded. "Freddy's got my baby. He's got my Dylan!"

The nurses looked at each other, not as amused as they were before. Neither was Dr. Hefner, who grabbed her by the arm and shook her hard.

"Ms. Langenkamp!" growled Dr. Hefner. Once she had Heather's attention, she went on in a more civilized tone. But the underlying threat was clear. "I suggest you go home and get some rest. Your son is fine. He's been taken downstairs for further testing."

"He was just here!" Heather protested.

Dr. Hefner took a deep breath. When she spoke, it was as if to a small, mentally handicapped child.

"He *was* here. You fell asleep. We took him." She paused, waiting

for her words to sink in. Then she added a note of extreme concern and sympathy to her tone. "You looked so exhausted, frankly, we didn't want to wake you. Besides, the young woman, Julie, is with him. Believe me, everything is fine."

Heather didn't believe her. "Everything is *not* fine!" she snapped, and stormed out of the room. From behind her, she heard Dr. Hefner call out to a nurse, "Call security."

Heather's pace quickened in her search for Dylan. She ducked down some stairs and emerged two floors below, trying to remember exactly where the testing area was located.

A group of nurses intercepted her in the hallway. Heather barreled right through them and they ran to catch up. As she strode through the halls, she opened every door behind which she saw a light. In the process, she saw many things—patients sleeping, drug closets, a rest room—but no Dylan.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"This is a restricted area," answered one nurse. "Do you have a pass?" This nurse took firm hold of Heather's shoulder. Heather stopped abruptly and two other nurses collided. She shoved the grabby nurse away.

"Screw your pass!" Heather snarled, and started to walk away. Dr. Hefner appeared at the end of the hall and flagged her down.

"It's all right now," she said as she approached with another nurse. "Ms. Langenkamp. Just remain calm." Then she turned to the nurse that accompanied her and asked her smugly, "Tell us how our boy is doing."

The nurse looked at Heather, then back to Dr. Hefner. Immediately, she appropriated Dr. Hefner's dislike for Heather—and the doctor's smugness.

"He's fine, actually. He came out of coma ten minutes ago." Then she lowered her voice and whispered to the doctor, "It's looking like acute sleep deprivation. I don't think she ever lets the kid get a night's sleep."

"Munchausen syndrome?" Dr. Hefner mused.

Heather saw them whispering and pushed closer. "What're you saying? Where is he?" Only one nurse stood between her and Dr. Hefner. She was calculating how easy it would be to reach the doctor and force her to say where they were hiding Dylan when a door opened behind Heather. Two security guards stepped into the hallway and marched toward the gathering. Then a voice cried out from the other direction.

"Over here, Heather!" Julie stood waving from a doorway, smiling

broadly. Heather had nearly forgotten she was at the hospital. Thank God she's here, Heather thought. Taking a deep breath, she locked her eyes on Julie and moved toward her. As she passed Dr. Hefner, the doctor gestured with her hand and Heather heard the security guards' footsteps halt.

"Got someone here who wants to see you!" Julie beamed when Heather reached the door. She ran inside and found Dylan sitting on an examination table. As soon as he saw Heather, he held out his arms. He looked so tired and pale. Heather swept him up into an embrace.

"You okay, champ?" she whispered as she held him. The others would be here in a moment and they would soon have no privacy.

"Can we go get Rex now? The bad man's getting awful close."

"I know he is, sweetie. We'll both go get Rex right now." She lifted Dylan off the table. Regardless of how he looked, his spirit remained intact. He reminded her so much of his father at this moment. The problem was identified. And for himself, he saw the solution. If only Rex was the answer that would help them all.

She turned with Dylan in her arms and found Dr. Hefner standing in the doorway.

"I'm afraid Dylan really should stay with us until we know what's causing these episodes, Ms. Langenkamp. I'm sure you understand." Her voice said she wasn't fooling around now. And if Heather failed to cooperate, there would be consequences.

Heather thought quickly. She wanted Dylan out of here and safe at home with Rex. But even she wouldn't be let out of here if she tried to fight Dr. Hefner. There was only one thing to do. She motioned Julie to join her and Dylan by the examination table. At the sign of a private conference, Dr. Hefner politely left the room.

"Tell you what," she said to Dylan. "I'm gonna go get Rex for you right now. You know home isn't far away from here, right?"

"Right 'cross the freeway," he answered with certainty. He really *had* heard, thought Heather. And remembered.

"That's right," she said. "So I won't be long. Meanwhile, Julie's gonna be right here with you."

"You bet," chimed in Julie, not missing a beat.

Heather placed Dylan back onto the table and Julie took his hand. Though he understood the situation, he wasn't happy that his mother had to leave. As she turned toward the door, he grabbed her hand.

"Hurry back, please." His spirit may have been intact, but it was still battered. "I'm sleepy."

"Promise. Cross my heart." Then she kissed him and said, "But until

Mommy gets back, Dylan, whatever you do, don't fall asleep." By the look in his eyes, she didn't have to tell him that twice. She turned to Julie. "Don't let him out of your sight. And keep him awake!" She waited for Julie to question her, or for the least sign she wasn't taking her seriously, but neither happened.

"I'll stick to him like glue, Heather. Swear to God." She wasn't merely being her agreeable self this time; she meant it. Heather hugged her, squeezed Dylan's hand in goodbye, and walked out the door.

Immediately, the security guards stepped from an alcove. Each grabbed one of her elbows and dragged her down the hall to the dispensary, where Dr. Hefner was waiting.

"Do you mind?" Heather said with as much annoyance as she could muster. At the moment, it was quite a lot.

"Just a quick word, Ms. Langenkamp." And then she spoke what she imagined were the magic words. "For Dylan's sake."

The guards seated her roughly and moved into position on either side of the door. The doctor waved away two nurses and turned to Heather. Her professional manner was now merely a thread she was preparing to pick off her personality. She sat on the desk, intentionally looming over Heather.

The whole act would have bored Heather if she weren't so angry.

"Well, it's been an exciting few days for you, hasn't it, Ms. Langenkamp?"

Heather looked at her in disgust. My husband was killed a few days ago and that's not the half of it, she thought.

"If you don't mind, I've got something more important to do than to make small talk." Heather started to rise, but Dr. Hefner forced her back into the chair.

"Won't you please be patient? All of this is just routine." The good doctor was just itching to pick that professional thread off.

Julie sat quietly with Dylan in the examination room. They talked to keep each other awake. In the back of her mind, Julie hoped Heather would be back soon. Weird things were happening and Heather seemed to understand them. Julie sure didn't. The dream she had that night was bizarre and frightening, though frankly, she had felt foolish once she arrived at the hospital. Then Heather had shown up. Julie realized then that maybe it wasn't just a dream she'd had, but perhaps a premonition. If so, then she was being warned. But about what? Not only did she not know, she couldn't even imagine. While things had been rocky for Dylan tonight, he had encountered no danger of the

magnitude she had sensed in her dream. At least not that she could tell. Certainly, nothing here had been as horrifying as his episode the day Chase died.

She recalled that Heather had been unusually touchy that day. For a while, she had considered the possibility that her friend's mental scales might be tipping. But maybe, on top of the caller and the earthquake, she had sensed that something terrible was about to happen. And maybe that something terrible was Chase's accident.

I'm not equipped for this, Julie thought. I'm just a granola girl. Heather, on the other hand, seemed to have a handle on everything. When she had asked Julie to keep Dylan awake, she left no doubt as to how vital that instruction was. And Dylan knew what was happening, that was certain. He didn't want to go to sleep any more than Heather wanted him to.

The only real problem now seemed to be that creepy Dr. Hefner. Heather was probably keeping the doctor in the dark. That was a tough call, one that Julie didn't know if she could have made. Dr. Hefner seemed to be a person accustomed to having her way. The woman was definitely trouble. When I have kids, I won't be taking them to see this doctor, she thought. Probably overcompensating for some significant slight earlier in her life. On the one hand, fighting someone like that could easily make things difficult. On the other, telling her a truth that she was incapable of believing might be worse.

Julie was glad all she had to do was sit with Dylan and keep him awake until Heather came back. They played games and talked, and she kept herself from asking Dylan about sleeping, or dreams, or the bad man she'd heard him mention at other times. She didn't want to know. And besides, she figured, what I don't know can't hurt me.

She and Dylan were playing I Spy when the nurses entered. One came directly to the table while the other went to a large cabinet across the room. She opened the cabinet and rummaged in it conspicuously. Julie went over and found the nurse holding a large needle and a small vial of clear liquid. The nurse turned toward the examination table but Julie blocked her.

"Would you mind stepping outside for one moment, miss?" she asked, very politely.

"As a matter of fact I would," Julie replied as the nurse plunged the needle into the vial and filled the syringe. "What do you think you're doing?"

The nurse pointed the needle to the ceiling and squeezed the air bubble out of the syringe. A small amount of fluid squirted into the air. She gave Julie a nonchalant smile.

"Just a little shot to see that he gets some sleep." She started toward

Dylan, but Julie grabbed her arm. Instead of fighting, the nurse just looked at her with an odd smirk. Their eyes locked for a moment, then the nurse looked past her.

"Do it," she said, and from behind Julie she heard Dylan yelp.

"Ow!"

Julie turned in time to see the second nurse pulling a needle from Dylan's arm. He had been watching the confrontation at the cabinet and was caught off guard.

"All done," chirped the nurse standing by Dylan. Realizing what was about to happen, Dylan panicked and began to cry.

"He'll be asleep in no time," said Julie's nurse with a look of self-satisfaction. "Mind letting go of my arm?"

Julie looked down at her right arm, still holding tight on the nurse. She was so angry, she was shaking. But she let go. The nurse thanked her and smoothed out the wrinkles on her sleeve.

"Bitch!" Julie yelled suddenly, and, before the nurse could react, brought her other arm around in a wicked left hook. Her fist connected solidly with the broad expanse of the nurse's right cheek, sending her flying into the hallway. She landed on her back and lay still.

"Hey! You can't do that!" yelled the other nurse as she marched toward Julie.

Without hesitation, Julie picked up the needle dropped by the nurse she decked and spun around. She and the other nurse leveled their respective needles at each other like Old West gunfighters. Julie was still on a roll.

"I know what's in that one," Julie said. "Do you know what's in this one?" She didn't. But she was betting that the nurse didn't, either. "Or what it'll do to you when I stick you with it? And I will." She feinted, jabbing the needle slightly forward. It was no contest. The nurse dropped her needle like a hot potato and ran. Julie chased her to the doorway, slammed the door shut, and locked it. She took no time to gloat over her victory, but ran back to Dylan. His eyes were already starting to flutter as the sedative took effect.

"Dylan! Don't fall asleep." She shook him. He was fighting the drug but was losing the battle. "Dylan!"

She couldn't let him fall asleep. Heather had specifically asked her to keep him awake. Dylan would be in grave danger if he fell asleep. At first, Julie thought she knew this because of how serious Heather had been. But that was not it at all. The feeling of danger from her dream had returned, full force.

In the dispensary, Dr. Hefner decided to tone down her tough act. Besides, she had the guards here for the rough stuff. Trying to seem more sympathetic, she pulled up a stool so she could sit level with Heather. Then she leaned in, supposedly so the guards couldn't hear.

"Ms. Langenkamp, has . . ." She faltered in a calculated fashion. "Has there been any use of recreational drugs in your family? Or any history of mental disturbance?" She gave Heather a look that said, "It's all right. You can tell me."

Heather's slow boil began to heat up rapidly. Every moment she wasted with the doctor was another moment Dylan was in danger. And Heather knew that this line of questioning was a dead end. Unfortunately, everything rational supported Dr. Hefner's suspicions. Worse still, it was clear she had her own agenda. But rational was not on the menu today. Heather supposed she should understand, and even forgive, Dr. Hefner's misguided thinking. After all, she didn't have all the necessary information. But from the beginning the doctor had gone out of her way to be condescending. And even under normal circumstances, Dr. Hefner's question would have galled her.

"What the hell are you asking?" She leaned forward, and Dr. Hefner held out her hands in a practiced, nonthreatening gesture.

"Please don't take this wrong. But if there was, there's a good chance Dylan could be suffering from something passed down to him. Have you been suffering from any delusional events, Ms. Langenkamp?"

The gloves were off now. Dr. Hefner was now directly challenging Heather's mental stability. Heather stood, wanting to leave and deal with this later, but a guard grabbed her before she could turn and pushed her back down in the seat.

"This man from your films," continued Dr. Hefner as if she hadn't noticed. "Freddy Krueger. Have you been seeing him?"

Heather saw she was being given a chance to admit to her "problem." If she didn't, the doctor seemed ready to take matters out of her hands. Well, matters were well out of the doctor's hands.

"No!" Heather responded. She began to feel a raw tingling sensation on her arm. Looking down, she saw that blood was again seeping from underneath her bandages.

Dr. Hefner ignored the wound and merely looked disappointed. She shrugged as if to say she had tried, but now had no choice. The doctor began to explain Heather's alternatives to cooperation.

"There are drugs, Ms. Langenkamp. We could place Dylan in foster care for a short while, run some tests on you—"

Heather cut her off by standing abruptly. She turned and bumped into the guards. They grabbed her shoulders to force her into the chair

again, but she didn't yield. Instead, she whirled around and yelled into Dr. Hefner's face.

"I want my kid out of here, *now!*"

Dr. Hefner just studied her for a moment, then let her eyelids droop with even greater disappointment.

"Very well. As soon as we gather the appropriate papers."

In other words, thought Heather, not anytime soon. With nothing left to lose, Heather decided to tell the doctor the truth.

"You don't understand," she began. "If Dylan falls asleep, then—" Shouts coming from the hallway outside interrupted her. They were accompanied by the sounds of several people banging on a door.

In the examination room, Julie was desperate. Soon someone would bring a key and they'd haul her away. Then Dylan would fall asleep for sure. Until then, she did her best to shake him as hard as she could without hurting him. He was trying to help her, but the drug was too strong.

"Where's Mommy?" he slurred. "Where's—" And then he stopped talking and his head lolled onto his shoulder.

She shook him again and his head simply rolled back. With extreme effort, he lifted his head and forced his eyes open. Only a crack, but they were open. Then he was looking behind her. Fear caused his eyelids to flutter. He was trying to raise his arm to point.

"Julie—behind you . . ." His words were barely audible. She turned and found nothing. But he continued to look past her in fear.

An unseen shadow fell across her, and suddenly, Julie felt several sharp objects plunged into her chest. An invisible force lifted her into the air and her last sensation was that of balancing on a pitchfork. Her scream was cut off almost the moment it began as her lungs were punctured.

The door opened. Nurses rushed into the room to a horrible sight they could never have expected. Julie's body was hovering in midair. Then it rose slightly and smashed to the ground as if thrown. Then the invisible force dragged her across the floor and, impossibly, up the wall, leaving a bloody trail.

The nurses were paralyzed by the gruesome sight of the body, now sliding across the ceiling. As horrible as it was, the sheer incredible nature of the phenomenon riveted their attention. They didn't notice Dylan's eyes drift closed, then snap open, glazed with fear as if, now asleep, he could see what was mutilating Julie. He could. His entire body went rigid as Julie's body slithered overhead. Then the attack was over, and Julie's body dropped to the floor with a sickening

smack. Blood splashed onto the nurses.

Dylan ran out of the room as they began to scream.

From the Journal of David Bergantino June 25, 1994

It's been a couple of weeks since I last called LeCroix. Haven't heard from him, and frankly, with everything that's been going on, I had forgotten about him entirely. Something about the way I've been feeling lately reminded me of the way LeCroix had sounded in messages, and even in his note. So I dug out his number and dialed it again.

After many rings—apparently the machine wasn't hooked up anymore—a bleary female voice answered LeCroix's phone. It sounded like I just woke her up. When I asked for Jason, there was a long silence, then she said simply, "Jason's not here." When I asked when he'd be back, there was another long, uncomfortable silence.

"Jason . . . is . . . uh . . . died," she said in a tiny voice.

At first I was speechless. Then, before I realized it was none of my business, I found myself asking when it happened.

"Two weeks ago," she replied, slightly more coherent. I felt so sorry for this girl. "He was . . . murdered," she continued. "Someone broke into the apartment. I'm . . . was . . . his girlfriend. Marnie. Who is this, anyway?"

I told her my name and that Jason had been calling me. Did she know why?

"No, I don't," she said. "He'd been working a lot lately, so I haven't been around much. So I can't help you. Sorry."

I should have left her alone with her pain then, but I didn't—I couldn't. I told her it had seemed important to Jason that he reach me, and that he said it concerned my book.

"Oh, you're a writer?" she asked dully. "He was a writer, too." I think at that point she began remembering him and became very sad. "Got his first paying job, too. That's why he was so busy all the

time.”

A cold chunk of ice formed in my chest. I asked what he had been working on.

“A Freddy Krueger book,” she answered. “He was so excited about it.”

Then she started to cry. Except I didn’t hear much of it, because I think I mumbled “I’m sorry” and hung up the phone.

And stared at the wall for about an hour.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
June 26, 1994

After the staring episode, I went to the beach and alternately dozed and wandered around for hours. Then I went to a bar and got extraordinarily, majorly smashed. Luckily, I don’t remember much, but I’ve got a hell of a hangover. I’m just lucky that I was passed out instead of actually being asleep. Because then I would have been in danger of dreaming, and I don’t know if being drunk carries over in the dreamworld. If it does, then I would not have been able to defend myself.

Well, here I am, a little clearer-headed and twice as frightened. Things have been occurring to me that being drunk couldn’t blot out, like:

I think Freddy Krueger murdered Jason LeCroix.

Which means that I believe Freddy is for real.

Which means that the events in the movie really took place more or less the way they’re described.

Which means I might very well be next on Freddy’s slash list.

Oh shit.

But how does Jason fit in and how did he know to contact me? He was a writer, so the only thing I can figure is that he found out through my agent. Maybe Laurel represents him, too. I dunno. But that seems to be the place to start.

I just hope the end doesn’t come too soon.

7

The sounds of murder shattered the tension in the dispensary. The guards took off toward the commotion immediately, leaving Heather alone with Dr. Hefner. Rising swiftly to her feet, Heather still expected the doctor to try stopping her. But Dr. Hefner didn't even blink. Her features were frozen in place, her face a mask of terror. Heather hurried out of the room before the doctor could come to her senses.

Heather arrived at the examination room moments after the guards. By now, the screaming had subsided, replaced by deep sobbing and sounds of retching. A nurse staggered out of the room. One guard tried to push past her, but she held him back.

"Forget it," she said, barely able to speak. "Nothing you can do in there. Call the cops. Now."

The terror in her expression convinced the guards to go no farther. They turned abruptly and ran down the hall. As Heather approached, the lead nurse staggered away after the guards. Others came stumbling through the doorway. They did not try to stop Heather from entering the room. It was taking all their strength simply to keep from screaming. When Heather looked in, she saw why.

Blood was everywhere. Heather followed the trail of blood with her eyes. The smear went up the wall and across the ceiling. Heather's terror deepened when she realized it was a chilling duplication of the scene in the first *Elm Street* in which Tina was murdered. Blood dripped from the ceiling and landed on the surface of the examination table with a rhythmic metallic splat. Behind the table lay Julie. Her eyes were wide with terror, the violence of her death evident in her expression. Heather turned from the sight. The door suddenly seemed miles away. Her mind was overloading, shutting down. Then a thought broke through the fuzz: Dylan was not in the room. She staggered for the door and somehow made it to the hallway without passing out. One nurse remained, leaning against a wall. She was dazedly rubbing a purple bruise that swelled from her cheekbone.

"My son," Heather asked her. "Did you see my son?"

At first the nurse didn't seem to understand the question. Then the words sank in, and she spoke haltingly.

"I—I thought he was here. I thought . . ." She trailed off, rubbing her bruise with one hand, pointing vaguely with the other.

Footsteps approached from behind Heather. She turned to find Dr.

Hefner, stumbling from the dispensary like a malfunctioning automaton. The paralysis had broken, but her mind was still reeling with her sudden loss of control of the situation.

"No way he's going anywhere," she insisted desperately. Her voice had a crazed edge. "He's been well sedated."

"He doesn't have to be awake to be on his feet," Heather told her. If she could get the doctor to snap out of it, she might be willing to help.

"What?" asked Dr. Hefner. She only blinked at Heather, utterly without comprehension.

"He sleepwalks, you idiot!" Heather yelled, wanting to shake the doctor until she broke. "He's fully capable of walking out of this hospital!" Then she stopped, realizing. "Oh my God! He thinks I've gone home!"

Without another word, she spun around and ran off, leaving Dr. Hefner to stare dumbly at the place she had been standing.

Los Angeles Times
March 22, 1993
Page 5–A

Hospital Attack
Leaves One Dead

By Kevin Levant

In the early morning hours, an unidentified woman died at St. Joseph's Valley Hospital. The causes were not natural, nor due to illness. In fact, she wasn't even a patient. Instead, the woman died of multiple stab wounds inflicted during a knife attack while she visited the sick child of a friend.

The Los Angeles Times has learned that the attack took place behind a locked door and that the assailant escaped, without even being seen. The only possible witness was the child the woman was visiting, but somehow he disappeared in the confusion following the discovery of the woman's body.

A major lawsuit seems likely as the hospital is forced to answer questions regarding the competence of its security force. Some patients are transferring to different hospitals, saying they no longer feel safe at St. Joseph's.

A hospital spokesperson had no comment on the incident, except to say that it was "a tragedy," and that a full investigation into the matter will commence immediately.

Los Angeles Times
March 27, 1993
Page 14–A

Distraught Doctor
Kills Self, Dog

By Sheri Callendar

The body of Dr. Carla Harker, former Director of Pediatric Medicine at St. Joseph's Valley Hospital, was found today in the front seat of her car parked in the garage of her Beverly Hills home. Beside her was the body of her Welsh corgi, Brat. According to the coroner, the bodies had been there for at least two days. The engine of the car had been left running, flooding the garage with exhaust fumes. Both Dr. Harker and her dog died of carbon monoxide poisoning. The doctor's death has been ruled a suicide.

Friends of Dr. Harker say that she had been despondent since being forced to resign from her post at St. Joseph's following the investigation of the murder of a visitor six months ago. At the time, there were unconfirmed reports of irregularities in the doctor's performance of her duties the night of the incident. No charges were ever filed against her. The entire case has been sealed by the police, and the hospital, through its spokesperson, has repeatedly refused comment.

Dr. Harker will be buried, along with her pet, after private services to be held later this week. She was unmarried and had no children. Relatives have asked that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to the ASPCA.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
June 27, 1994

Waiting for Laurel to return my call. Left an urgent message. Got restless waiting, so I went back to the library one more time.

One more look into Pandora's box.

At least Dr. Harker/Hefner was lucky. Freddy didn't get her. But was she really that distraught, or was she just trying to beat Freddy to the punch?

Something for me to think about while I wait for a callback.

* * *

Heather reached the ground level of the hospital after nearly leaping down three flights of stairs. Pandemonium was breaking loose in the front lobby as the police arrived. One of Dr. Hefner's guards yelled for her to stop, but Heather ignored him. She had to find Dylan. Once outside, she found her car, gunned the engine, and tore out of the hospital parking lot, nearly colliding with several cars.

As she raced home, Heather realized that she didn't know exactly where Dylan could be. He might even return to the hospital. If so, someone needed to be there and keep Dr. Hefner away from him. With Wes writing and Robert either missing or out of town, there was only one person she could turn to. She punched John Saxon's number into her car phone and prayed for him to answer.

The phone was picked up, dropped, then a deep, sleepy voice answered. "John Saxon—do you have any idea what time it is?"

"John, it's Heather. I need help!"

"You got it," he answered, instantly alert. "What's happening?"

"Dylan's run away from the hospital." Heather scanned the streets as she talked. She was fighting to maintain control of both the car and herself. "I don't know whether he's wandering around or heading for the house. But I think Freddy's after him. I know it sounds crazy."

"You're right, that sounds crazy," he said, but he was not judging, just listening.

"John, will you please just look for him around the hospital? I'm gonna go right to the house." She felt the tears coming, and if they did, she could not stop them. "Will you help me, John? Please?"

He didn't answer immediately. For a moment she thought he had hung up. If he abandoned her, she would be left with no one.

"I'm on my way," he said finally. "You go home, Heather. That's the smart thing to do. I'll call you there." His tone gave no doubt of his unquestioning support.

Now she began to cry. But with the influx of relief came more fear.

"Thank you, John. I'll never forget—"

A terrifying sight through her windshield cut her off. She slammed on the brakes and the car screeched to a stop. Across the street, a tiny figure was climbing the embankment that bordered the freeway. It was Dylan. Soon he stood at the edge of the freeway, lit by the glare of a thousand headlights. Wind whipped his hair and clothes as he strained forward, staring across eight lanes of high-speed traffic, trying to see his home. Heather leaped out of the car as Dylan began to climb the guardrail.

“Dylannn!” she screamed. She had little hope that he could hear her over the roar of cars and trucks. But he stopped climbing the guardrail and turned.

Dylan thought he heard his mother calling from somewhere below. At least it sounded like her. But it could also be the mean man playing a trick. He knew what the mean man could do. Dylan didn’t know how long she had been gone, or whether there had been time for her to get Rex and start back to the hospital. He looked down past the scrub that covered the embankment and saw her. It was his mother, his real mother. The mean man couldn’t fool him that much, even from this far away.

“Dylan! Stay right there,” she called.

So he stayed put. As she scrambled up the embankment, the clouds began to move in the sky. Dylan looked up and saw him, the mean man his mother called Freddy. He was made of clouds, and his eyes were two rotten moons. The wide brim of his felt hat almost blotted out the real moon. Then Dylan saw the steel claws, the ones that had hurt Rex and Julie. Only now they were huge, each one long enough to skewer him lengthwise. As they passed through the sky, the razors left gashes in the sky itself. The moonlight shined off them as they reached down. If he ran to his mother, Freddy would have him.

As Heather fought her way up the hill, she saw Dylan suddenly look upward. She stopped and followed his gaze but saw nothing. By the time she looked back, Dylan was scrambling over the guardrail. Then, without a moment’s hesitation, he ran right onto the freeway and disappeared from view. As fast as she could, she clawed her way up the embankment. Car horns blared and wheels screeched above her, but she heard no sounds of impact. An eighteen-wheeler screamed by as she reached the guardrail, the rush of air nearly sending her tumbling back down the embankment.

She could see Dylan now, between the first two lanes. His face looked blank and terrified all at the same time. He ambled in circles, looking to the sky all the while. Suddenly, his body was glowing in the light of an oncoming car. Heather screamed as the car swerved out of the way just in time. Cars roared by on either side. He was trapped.

Then the impossible happened. Dylan abruptly rose in the air several feet. As Heather watched, he was set down again in the path of a large flatbed truck. Dylan appeared to be struggling with something invisible. Just when a collision seemed unavoidable, he flew into the air again and the truck rushed by. He landed twenty feet away in the

path of a Jeep. Again, Dylan was lifted away at the last possible moment. Heather could only watch helplessly as Dylan was tossed mercilessly from one near collision to the next. But her terror turned to anger at the sight of her son being used for sport.

"Freddy!" she yelled into the empty sky. "You bastard! Take me!" She ran onto the freeway.

Freddy had caught up to Dylan in the middle of the freeway and snagged his shirt on one gleaming claw. He dangled there, helpless as Freddy threw him from place to place on the freeway. The boy tried to close his eyes, but the scarred face was still visible in the dark of his mind. Even the prospect of being hit by a car was not as frightening as the mean man's evil leer blazing in his head.

His mother's shouting made him open his eyes again. He could see her running toward him waving her arms. She didn't see the cylindrical truck, a tanker truck his father used to call them, bearing down on her. But the driver saw his mother and slammed on his brakes. The screech of the truck as it slid forward drowned out all other sounds. The tanker then twisted sideways and swept toward his mother like a wall across three lanes. She seemed to be frozen in place. Dylan screamed for his mother to run, and finally she did. Only, there was nowhere to go. She dived to the ground as the rear of the truck slid over her. Dylan was certain she'd been crushed. The part of him that Freddy had touched and made to grow old wished God had taken him in the playground that day.

The tanker came to a halt far past his mother's body. She was motionless, but he saw no blood around her like he had expected. Then she sat up, dazed but otherwise unhurt. It took him a moment to realize the truck's undercarriage had been high enough to pass over his mother without touching her. The shock and relief almost made him forget that any moment now Freddy might not lift him out of the way of some onrushing vehicle.

Then the blade holding him sliced through his shirt. He dropped like a pebble on the surface of the freeway. Headlights caught him immediately. In a desperate leap, he made it to the median strip just as the car shot past. The fence was too high for him to climb, but he found a hole and crawled through to the other side of the freeway. He looked back and saw his mother dodging a station wagon that bore down on her. Another car caught her unaware and hit her head-on as it tried to stop. She was sent flying through the air and landed on her back thirty feet away. Dylan yelled but no one could hear. He waited, but she didn't get back up again. The traffic was finally beginning to stop and several drivers left their cars to help. He wanted to go back,

but Freddy was looking down at him again. Reluctantly, he turned and started across the other half of the freeway.

Traffic was lighter on this side, but cars still whizzed by dangerously. He looked up to see if Freddy was reaching for him again but saw only clouds and the moon. Just like that, the mean man was gone. This was his chance to return to his mother. But when he turned back, Freddy was there—in force. Thousands of Freddys all peered over the median strip at him. Then they began to pour over the fence like invading soldiers. Only one thing can help me now, Dylan thought. He turned and darted safely across the final two lanes, hopped over the guardrail, and tumbled down the embankment. When he stopped tumbling, he was dizzy and scratched but safe. He was across the freeway. Home was not far away. And Rex was waiting.

Heather regained consciousness just as Dylan was fleeing the horde of Freddys. At first she didn't remember what had happened or where she was. A crowd of people surrounded her. They were talking, but their words were meaningless. The ground was hard and gritty. Peering past the legs of those standing over her, she saw she was on the highway. Then she heard squealing breaks and screaming car horns. Dylan had been crossing the freeway and must now be on the other side of the median strip, she realized. She tried to stand. Instantly, she felt a sharp pain in her side. Gritting her teeth against it, she struggled to her feet. The voices were understandable now. They were telling her to hold still, wait for the ambulance. She pushed away the hands that sought to restrain her and staggered away from the crowd. Many were too shocked that she was even moving to think of stopping her.

At the median strip, Heather laboriously pulled herself over the fence. Rubberneckers were slowing traffic on this side, so she was able to make it across the four lanes without being struck. When she got to the top of the opposite embankment, its steepness was dizzying. There was no way to get down without falling, especially in her condition. So she went limp and allowed herself to roll down the hill. When her equilibrium returned, she brought herself painfully to her feet and headed for home.

Away from the freeway, the streets were peaceful and still. The sounds of her own body flooded her ears. Joints cracked and blood pounded in her ears. Her own breath roared in her head like Freddy's furnaces. Bruises and scratches covered much of her exposed body. Blood stained her clothing. The faintest grinding sound accompanied the sharp pain in her side, suggesting a broken rib. But I'm alive, she thought. Freddy hasn't won yet.

Her house finally appeared up the street. She quickened her pace as much as possible and started up the walk. Then stopped. The front door stood open as if the house were waiting for her. The possibility of a trap briefly crossed her mind. Her desperation to find Dylan was making her careless, she knew, but so be it. Heather entered the house. The living room was empty and silent.

"Dylan!" she called. He didn't answer. Then a shadow moved in the kitchen. A big one. The figure of a man appeared in silhouette. She screamed and shrank back, certain that Freddy had come for her.

"Holy—" said a familiar voice from the kitchen. John Saxon emerged, wearing new sweats. He appeared almost as shocked as she was. Heather would have laughed if she weren't so panicked.

"Where's Dylan? Have you seen him?" The memory that John was supposed to be at the hospital floated up, but she pushed it away.

"Relax, Nancy. Relax!" he said, gesturing for her to calm down. Then he pointed toward the stairs. But she didn't look immediately. Did he call me Nancy? she wondered, unsure of her perceptions. His eyes revealed nothing out of the ordinary. Just concern. Finally, she looked to where he was pointing.

Dylan stood at the bottom of the stairs, clutching Rex. His eyes were open, but he was obviously still in a deep sleep. His lips were moving, and it took her a moment to realize he was singing softly.

"One, two, Freddy's coming for you . . . Freddy's coming for you . . ." He just repeated the words over and over like a needle was skipping in his head. The eerie quality of his voice was chilling, but it didn't keep her from running over to him and hugging him—so hard John raced over to make sure she wasn't hurting him.

"What in the world happened?" he asked.

Heather thought he deserved an explanation, no matter how crazy it might sound. So much had happened by now that was outside of her head. Julie's death was not just a paranoid delusion. The nurses had seen something horrifying and unforgettable. And it only took one look at Dylan to know that something very out of the ordinary was happening. She held Dylan tight and began to explain.

"I know how Chase really died," she said, her voice quivering.

"What are you talking about?" John's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Heather got the strange feeling he was expecting her to lie. She ignored the feeling and pushed on. It might be difficult for him to understand, but at least he would consider it.

"Fred Krueger did it."

In response, John did the most peculiar thing: he rolled his eyes at her, as if she was pulling his leg. "Yeah, right." Then he crossed his

arms, as if daring her to come up with a better story.

Heather was shocked. For a moment she didn't know what to say. She expected a little more sympathy from her friend, even if it did sound crazy. But he was rejecting the notion out of hand. It was singularly unlike John.

"You saw him, didn't you, Dylan!" It seemed a desperate move, but it was all she could come up with.

Dylan's only answer was to sing more of the song.

"Coming for you . . ." he chanted. Whatever his eyes were seeing, it was not this room.

John tugged gently on her sleeve. Concern and regret showed on his face now. Perhaps he was sorry for the way he was treating her. But Heather still couldn't shake the feeling that there was something peculiar about him.

"Hey, come outside a minute, I need to talk to you." He took her by the arm and began to march her to the front door. She tried to turn away, but though he held her gently, his grip was firm. He wouldn't let go. Just before they went through the door, she saw that Dylan had started sucking his thumb. He turned and began to walk slowly up the stairs to his bedroom.

"Dylan!" she yelled, but he was oblivious.

"Jesus!" said John as Dylan climbed out of sight. "What the hell's going on, Nancy?"

Heather spun around as if John had slapped her. While she stared, he led her out onto the front step. Just past the threshold, a wave of vertigo hit her. At first she thought she was going to pass out, but it wasn't that kind of sensation. It was more a feeling of dislocation. But even that wasn't as disturbing as how John was acting.

"John, why are you calling me Nancy?"

"Why are you calling me John?" he shot back. Again, the harsh look while he waited for her to explain herself.

The vertigo surged again and she looked around. Red light reflected off the white of the door frame and she spun back to face John. Only, he wasn't John anymore. He had become Lieutenant Thompson, her father in the first *Elm Street* movie. The sweats were gone, replaced by a sheriff's uniform and a heavy bomber jacket. Behind him on the curb sat an exact replica of his car from the movie. The red beam from the magnetic dome light lanced out into the night. Lieutenant Thompson was fiddling with the brim of his sheriff's hat.

"Nancy," he said, this time making her jump. "You gotta get hold of yourself before you make both yourself and that kid nuts."

Heather blinked a few times, but the illusion did not go away.

Apparently, Freddy was so close to breaking free, his presence was influencing her reality. But he couldn't cross over himself. Not while she was still alive. And she was not only alive but ready to fight him. Heather steadied herself and looked right at Lieutenant Thompson, hoping to see past the illusion to the real John Saxon she thought might be underneath.

"John," she said deliberately. Upon hearing his name, a look of pain and confusion swept across his face. She thought—hoped—that she was getting through whatever unreal barrier was between them. If she could remind him who he really was, perhaps he could fight Freddy, too. Then she asked him, just as deliberately, "Would you call Robert?"

He just stared.

"Robert?" he asked slowly. She thought she saw recognition flickering just below the surface of his expression.

"Robert Englund," she continued, trying to poke a hole back into reality. "You know, the actor who plays Freddy?"

"Freddy who?" he asked, instantly agitated.

I'm close now, she thought. Very close.

"You know who. Freddy Krueger."

The name hit him like a painful blow. He turned away and then back again quickly. His face turned bright red and she could see he was struggling. She reached out her hand, hoping that actually touching him would help.

"Freddy's dead, Nancy," he said suddenly. "Now, don't lose it like your mother."

Heather recoiled. She had failed. Freddy's strength was too great for her to wrestle reality away from him.

Before she knew what was happening, he was hugging her, rocking her like she was his little girl. When he let go, there were tears in his eyes. All at once, she knew exactly what he was thinking. Lieutenant Thompson thought he had made the mistake of mentioning her "mother." She had died at the end of the first movie, and the subject would be a sore spot between them.

"I love you, sweetheart. Don't you ever forget that." He brushed away a lock of hair that had fallen into her face, and turned away.

As he got into his police cruiser, there was only one thing for her to say, "I love you, too . . . Daddy."

The moment she said that, she could feel Freddy starting to push through into the world. In her mind she saw him rising from the space beyond the bottom of Dylan's bed. As the blankets stretched around him, the Claw slashed through. Soon they dropped away, revealing a

hulking silhouette of evil. The impression was burning in her mind. But an invisible membrane, invulnerable to his lethal claw, kept him from coming any farther. The gate was still closed and she was its keeper. Only her death would open it. Until then, he could play his tricks but could not pass through.

"Now get yourself some rest, Nancy. Please?" said Lieutenant Thompson from the car. He didn't wait for a reply before he started the engine, turned on the siren, and roared off into the night.

Then *everything* changed. Heather's front yard was no longer hers. It became Nancy's. She looked down to find herself dressed in pajamas. Turning, she saw that she now stood in front of the fictional house of the *Elm Street* movies. Barred windows gave it a blind expression, but it seemed that the house recognized her. The front door swung wildly on its hinges as the wind began to pick up. It howled through the trees as it had a few nights before.

Heather was at the crossroads. The time had come to make her choice. She could reject the challenge if she wanted, but she had no idea what the consequences of doing so might be. She realized that the possibilities were so horrifying that her mind could not—would not—comprehend them. All of life, and not just for her, would become a nightmare. To stop now would mean turning her back on Chase and Dylan. And Julie. That notion was even further beyond comprehension.

She started into *Nancy's* house—her house.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
June 28, 1994

Laurel never returned any of my calls so I went over to the office. I wanted to know about Jason LeCroix. The first thing I saw was the dark circles under her eyes. Initially, she wouldn't talk to me. Even yelled at me to get out of her office. But I didn't. Finally, she fessed up.

I was one of three people who were hired to write the book. They—the movie people, the publisher, the agency—figured that between the three writers, *someone* would complete the book.

Complete the book before what? I asked. Before Freddy offed us? Because the movie hadn't been quite enough and you needed a book as the final nail in his coffin?

You're crazy! she yelled. You ought to be put away.

Okay, I answered. So have me put away. Fire me.

All she said was, "I can't." It was because I was the last one left. She didn't have to say it.

Then she wouldn't even look at me. I demanded to know who the third writer was, but she said it didn't matter, especially not now. When I asked what happened to him, she just looked at me and said, "I don't know." I believed her. I also believed she didn't want to know. The sadness and fear in her face suddenly became unbearable, so I left.

So here I am, about to pull the all-nighter of my life—and Jason LeCroix's and that of the third, unknown writer. If I can finish the book tonight, I might yet survive this job. Because finishing the book is the only way to put Freddy away for good.

I just have to make sure I don't fall asleep.

And I won't.

I got LOTS of coffee.

* * *

Dylan’s scream echoed down the stairs just as Heather entered the house. She turned toward the sound, and his voice was abruptly cut off. Before she could react, the front door slammed shut behind her with a metallic clang. She saw that it had been reinforced with steel. And now it was locked as well. She was trapped. Oddly enough, though the windows were still barred on the outside, the interior of the house was still hers.

“Dylan?” she called up the stairway. But there was no answer. Going into the kitchen, she armed herself with the largest butcher knife she could find. She wasn’t sure if it would be effective against Freddy, but it was her only weapon. The sound of her own voice emanating from the living room caused her to turn. The television was on, playing the final scene from *A Nightmare on Elm Street.*

“Fred Krueger did it, Daddy,” said Nancy on the television.

“Yeah, sure,” said her father.

Then the television winked off. Heather knew there was no turning back now. She would find Dylan and bring him back from wherever Freddy had taken him. As she approached the stairs, she noticed several small white dots on the carpet, leading up into the darkness. One lay near her feet. She stooped down and picked up a tiny capsule.

“Dylan’s sleeping pills,” she said out loud. She followed the trail, picking up capsules along the way. They led into Dylan’s room. Holding the knife in front of her, she reached inside and switched on the light. The room was empty, save for two more pills—and the disemboweled remains of Rex at the foot of the bed.

As she approached Rex, she noticed another pill on the blankets of Dylan’s bed, near the pillows. She picked up the last pill and kept it with the rest in her hand. Now what? she thought. Then, on an impulse, she lifted the blanket. Just below the pillows sat another pill. Lifting the blanket farther up, she saw yet another. Grabbing that one, she pulled off the blanket entirely, uncovering the danger area at the foot of the bed. She could see only the bed and the floor beyond. No more sleeping pills.

She knew that somehow Freddy had taken Dylan to his side of the gate. I may be the guard, she thought, but I have no key. I can’t go through any more than he can. Dropping the blankets back onto the bed, she sat down, trying to think. She could feel despair growing again. But despair feeds on hope to make room for itself in the soul. That meant there’s still hope, Heather thought. I’m not beaten yet, I just have to try harder to figure it out. A minute later she realized that

she held the key in her hand.

"He's given me the only way I can join him," she told herself, staring at the sleeping capsules lying on her palm. Must be twenty capsules at least, she thought skittishly. Before her nerve broke, she closed her eyes and took the sleeping pills. When she had finally swallowed them all, she opened her eyes again. So far, nothing had changed and she briefly wondered if this wasn't a trick of Freddy's to kill her with a drug overdose. If so, it was too late now.

She turned back to the bed and lifted the covers once more. Far underneath the blankets a small white dot gleamed dimly at the foot of the bed. Another pill. Heather tucked her knife in her belt and crawled underneath the blankets toward the pill. To reach it, she had to wriggle under until the blankets covered her completely. The light shining through the blankets made them glow just enough for her to see. Then she had the pill and started backing out. It was getting very stuffy underneath the covers. Before she emerged back into the light, she stopped. Maybe, just maybe, there was one more pill.

Crawling farther toward the foot of the bed, she lifted the blankets. She expected to uncover the foot of the bed. Instead, the sheets continued. And there, an impossible six feet away, where the bed and the blanket met, sat another capsule. When she reached it, she popped that capsule and the last one into her mouth and swallowed.

Heather took a deep breath and pushed forward through the sheets. There could be one more sleeping pill, and each additional capsule would lead her closer to Dylan. With the next section of sheets she lifted, instead of another pill, she uncovered infinity.

The sheets drifted away and the slope of bedding dropped steeply down ahead of her. Beyond her was an eerie, horizonless twilight. Heather's mind began to shrink in the face of its vastness. Only the terrified sound of Dylan's voice reverberating from somewhere in that infinite blankness stopped her from crawling backward to escape.

"Mommee!"

Without thinking, Heather dived forward, flying out into the nothingness. The bedding soon disappeared as she tumbled down. At first the featureless darkness gave her no sense of movement. Then far below emanated a red light, as if from a great fire. It seemed she was floating down toward the light. Suddenly, she became aware of wet stone walls on either side of her. Her mind lurched when she realized the incredible speed at which they shot by. With a bone-jarring impact, she unexpectedly hit bottom and shot forward, surrounded by water. An ancient aqueduct ejected her through a stony opening and she was falling again. The blankness returned for a while and all she could see below was a dark glimmer that looked like an angular black

hole with teeth. She fell through the mouth, the remains of a medieval rotunda, and dropped directly into a deep reservoir. The stagnant water stopped her fall, but she was now in danger of drowning. Directions became meaningless. At first she could only flail wildly about. Her oxygen-starved lungs were preparing to force her to breathe. But if she inhaled, only water would fill them. The slightest perception of “up” finally came to her and she propelled herself in that direction.

She broke the surface gasping and half-drowned. Her hands found an edge to the reservoir—which she vaguely recognized as a catch basin for an enormous downspout—and pulled herself half out of the water. Something moved on the ground. Her shadow danced in a flickering red light that shined from behind her. Turning, she saw an enormous wall of furnaces, each roaring and belching out plumes of smoke and flame. As her eyes adjusted to the light and she could make out the rest of her surroundings, her mind reeled. Galleries of stone, surreal structures of a nightmare city, stretched out in all directions. They were huge, completely out of human scale. A constant rain fell from thick clouds of steam from the boilers. The proportions were staggering, the atmosphere oppressive, but worse yet, an intense evil pervaded everything. That alone threatened to snuff her determination to go on. But she would not leave without her son.

“D-Dylan!” she yelled out, hoping to be heard over the roar of the furnaces. Her answer came almost instantly—the screeching of steel nails against steel, so piercing, it seemed her head might shatter. When it ended, even the roaring flames seemed faint by comparison. She wanted to run, but there was nowhere to go—except toward the sound.

As she dragged herself out of the basin, she could feel a tightness around her waist. Reaching down, she found the knife, still tucked in her belt. Its familiarity was a greater comfort at the moment than its sharpness. She headed toward the furnaces, splashing through the cobblestone streets in the direction of the screeching. A vaulted arch appeared not far away and opened into a cavernous room. The chamber glowed with the feverish light from the furnaces.

“Mommy?” came the faintest sound at the far end of the chamber. In the distance, Dylan sat alone in front of a furnace, his body a tiny silhouette against the great wall of flame. He was looking down at something in his hands. As she neared, he stood and held out what appeared to be a stack of papers.

The entire nightmare dimension became silent, as if holding its evil breath.

Heather stopped short of him. She looked around, expecting a trap.

“Dylan? Where’s the man?”

“Here,” he said, looking down at the papers.

Heather didn’t understand his meaning, but trap or not, she would be kept from him no longer. Running to him, she dropped the knife on the sill of the furnace before she lifted him into her arms. She hugged him close and covered him with kisses. Thank God, she prayed. He’s safe. Dylan hugged her back, but his hands still clutched the stack of papers tightly.

“What . . . what is that?” she asked, afraid to know. He had said the man was there. By the look in his face, he didn’t quite understand, either. But he knew that somehow the man was contained in these pages.

“A story?” he asked as she took the papers from him.

Despite their immediate danger, Heather felt compelled to look. She saw at once that it was a script. Wes’s script. She wondered where he was right now.

“Yes,” she told Dylan. “It’s a story. A story for a movie.”

“Read me some?” he asked. Heather was about to refuse when she realized that she had no idea how to return home. If this was the script, perhaps it held some clues. She began to read near the back, the accuracy of the words giving her an eerie feeling.

“At last his mother finds him,” she read. “She gives him a long, happy hug. And then looks at the pages. ‘Story?’ the little boy asks. ‘Yes,’ says his mother. ‘A story of us.’ And the mother takes the book and begins to read.”

That about brings us up to date, Heather thought, and looked at Dylan. His expression had become one of rapt attention. Apparently, in his desire to hear the story he had forgotten where they were. For a moment Heather forgot as well. Caught up in the absurdity of the situation, reading about her and Dylan, she laughed as she turned back to the script.

“And as she begins to read,” she continued, “from behind her, there comes . . . there comes . . .” Oh shit.

She turned around just as Freddy struck. He jerked her off her feet, lifted her into the air. At the same time, he snatched the script from her and flung it into the furnace. Dylan tumbled to the ground at Freddy’s feet, momentarily forgotten.

“Meet your maker!” Freddy bellowed, raising the Claw. Heather struggled but knew she was about to die. Then Freddy was screaming, a terrifying inhuman cry of pain. As he collapsed, she saw that Dylan had jammed the butcher knife into Freddy’s knee. He released Heather and clawed at Dylan, barely missing as the boy jumped out of the

way.

Heather leaped on top of Freddy in an attempt to hold him down.

"Run, Dylan!" she yelled, and he ran. Freddy twisted around before Heather could defend herself. Grabbing her by the throat, he flung her across the room where she landed against a stone pillar. She dropped to the ruined floor, unconscious.

As Freddy pulled the blade from his leg, he spied Dylan disappearing through an archway. He flung the knife away and chased after the boy, anxious to end this battle. Once the boy was dead, his mother would have no power. He could dispatch her easily and then move on. Through the gate and into the world. As Freddy Krueger.

In truth, he had no name, but his jailer, Wes Craven, had been correct: he enjoyed this particular persona. He found Freddy's particular evil gratifyingly savage. For ages, the taste of blood and terror had intoxicated him, and as Freddy, he became even more adept at satisfying the craving. As he chased the boy, he thought about his plans for the other side. His first order of business would be to find Craven. Freddy would meet his *own* maker, thank him for creating the perfect vessel—then gut him. With Craven dead, it would take at least another era for the world to produce a storyteller with the power to ensnare him again. Long before that could happen, Freddy intended to engulf the planet and its inhabitants with his evil until nothing good or innocent remained. But that would come later, after he killed this child.

Dylan was just ahead now. The corridor they ran through led to a flight of stairs. At the top was a narrow room that ended in one of the gigantic furnaces that populated Freddy's dimension. Dylan came into view as Freddy mounted the stairs. The boy was cowering against a ledge beneath the furnace. He looked around desperately for a way to escape, but Freddy knew he was trapped. There was only one entrance to this room. And Freddy was now walking through it. He had toyed with the child on the freeway to lure his mother through the gate. Now he would end his life. And very painfully.

Dylan soon realized the only place to go was into the furnace. Luckily, it was unlit. He scrambled up the ledge and disappeared into its gaping maw. Freddy flew at the furnace and reached in after him. The opening was too small for him to enter all at once. But if he pushed, Freddy could reach him with the Claw. Dylan jumped over a giant pilot light, just out of Freddy's reach. He was safe for now, but that wouldn't last long. Dylan had to find a way back out of the furnace.

All that surrounded him, it seemed, were rusted iron walls coated with ashes. Freddy swiped again with the Claw, coming so close this time, Dylan could feel the wind in his hair. He saw no way out. Realizing he was trapped, he began to scream for his mother.

Dylan's screams wrenched Heather back to consciousness. It sounded as if he was calling from within a kettledrum. As she rushed to help Dylan, she found the knife in a puddle and stuck it back into her belt. High above, she saw Freddy, the top half of his body jammed in the opening of a large furnace. Dylan's screams came from inside, she realized. The fact that the furnace appeared to be cold gave her little comfort.

Halfway up the stairs leading to the furnace room, the stone suddenly changed into a substance with the consistency of molasses. With each step, she sank deeper into the mire. The harder she fought against it, the stronger its hold on her became. This trick hadn't stopped Nancy in the first movie, she thought. It won't stop me now. With grim determination, she continued to climb the stairs.

The mean man almost got him that time. Dylan tried to flatten himself against the back wall of the furnace, but Freddy kept squeezing forward. When his mother hadn't answered his screaming, he realized he was alone. Even Rex couldn't protect him now, so it was up to him to fight the bad man. He had an idea, but first he needed to get out of the furnace.

Finally, he saw the way out. Above him, a hole no larger than his head led out of the furnace. It was his only chance. He jumped for the hole and caught the edge with both hands. Pulling himself up, he found he could just barely squeeze through.

A sharp tug nearly ripped off his pajama shirt. Then he was being pulled backward. Freddy had hooked him with one claw. He tried to hold on, but it was no use. The mean man was much too strong for him and he had to let go.

"Gonna eat you up!" Freddy growled. Slowly, Dylan was being dragged toward Freddy's gaping mouth. It grew wider until his jaw unhinged like that of a snake preparing to swallow a mouse. Dylan tried to crawl away, but Freddy had him. The demon's hot breath washed over him, only a few feet away now.

Suddenly, Freddy dropped him and began screaming, infinitely more horribly than when Dylan had stabbed him in the knee. Dylan scrambled away and ran to the back wall. Soon he had climbed the wall and began squeezing out the small opening.

Heather stood directly behind Freddy, the knife buried deep in his groin. If the ultimate evil of the universe is going to take the form of a man, that's his problem, she thought. And twisted the knife once more. Freddy's howling increased. He struggled to back out of the furnace, but he was stuck tight.

Her trouble with the stairs had vanished just as she heard Dylan start screaming again. She figured that Freddy couldn't concentrate on too many manifestations at once and she was able to climb the rest of the stairs easily. In his prone position, she had the choice between inflicting death or causing pain. She really didn't know if she could kill him, so she chose pain. By the sound of things, she had chosen well.

Dylan emerged from a vent at the side of the furnace. Without a word, he joined her and started pushing Freddy back into the furnace. Heather got the idea and helped, using the knife handle for better leverage. In his pain and panic, Freddy stopped fighting and drew himself fully inside the furnace. Heather reached up and closed the door, swiftly bolting it shut. Freddy's deafening screams continued from within the furnace. She didn't quite know what to do next, or how to get out of the nightmare world. The thought of being trapped here with Freddy mortified her.

While she backed away in fear, Dylan scrambled up the side of the furnace. He climbed toward a large iron lever just above the door. He leaped out at the lever, grabbing hold and pulling down with all his weight. There came a deep rumble, and all at once, flames exploded inside the furnace. Dylan was thrown from the lever by the force of Freddy's renewed shrieking. The temperature in the chamber was rising rapidly. Heather grabbed Dylan and staggered away from the overheating furnace. She turned one last time to see an impossibly brilliant light blazing from the furnace, outshining the flames. She turned away before it could blind her. Then the horrible screams changed. She realized that Freddy was laughing as the fire consumed him.

Then everything went white.

Heather and Dylan fell out of the bed and onto the floor. She didn't know how they got there, only that they were home. She pulled the blankets off the bed and wrapped them around the two of them. Dylan snuggled close and fell asleep almost immediately. Heather looked at the foot of the bed. And that's all she saw: bed.

Then she pulled down a couple of pillows and laid them on the floor. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the remains of Rex on the other side of the bed. He was beyond repair. Another casualty. The

sight of him torn to pieces saddened her almost as much as the thought of the human lives lost. That small, stuffed animal had doubtlessly saved her son's life in the nightmare world. She was about to curl up against Dylan when she spied something on the floor underneath the foot of the bed. It was a stack of papers loosely bound with three brads. She picked it up and opened it. The first page read:

WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE

A Filmscript by Wes Craven

Starring:

Heather Langenkamp as Herself
Robert Englund as Himself

Then she flipped to the back page and read:

Exhausted, but alive despite their terrible ordeal, mother and son curl up against one another and sleep.

Peacefully.

ROLL CREDITS

THE END

The Plain Dealer
Cleveland, Ohio
July 1, 1994
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Los Angeles Police Seek Clues in Cleveland Man's Disappearance

NORTH HOLLYWOOD, Calif.—Police responding to reports of screams and the sounds of a violent struggle discovered a grisly scene early Wednesday morning. They found the apartment of David Bergantino, formerly of Cleveland, Ohio, drenched in blood. Police are now seeking the 28-year-old writer for an explanation, but they are not very hopeful.

"We're pretty sure it's homicide," explained Officer Dale Markey, "But as of now, we have no body. Only all this blood. And if it's Mr. Bergantino's, well, that means whatever body we find won't have that much blood in it."

In addition, the apartment was ransacked and all upholstery slashed with what police are speculating was a straight razor.

According to friends and neighbors, Bergantino had been struggling to get his first "big break" in show business since his arrival in 1989.

"He was pretty quiet, except when he occasionally blasted Prince on his stereo," said one neighbor, who requested anonymity. "But he'd turn it down if you asked. Had a pretty bizarre sense of humor sometimes, but I liked him."

Bergantino had recently completed work on a novel based on the latest installment of the popular horror movie series "A Nightmare on Elm Street." A spokesperson for New Line Cinema, the films' producer, denied this was a publicity stunt to promote the book or the new movie.

"We don't need to play sick jokes to promote a film, especially an 'Elm Street' movie," said the spokesperson.

Friends of Bergantino, who asked not to be identified, told police that lately, the writer had become moody and paranoid.

"Something was going on. But he wouldn't talk about it," confided one. "Which wasn't like him. Usually, you couldn't get him to shut up about himself." Bergantino's friends fear the worst.

Police ask anyone with information regarding this case to call their Crime Stopper Number, toll-free at 1-800-555-4689. All calls will be kept confidential.

Editor's Note, October 1, 1994: This book was published using materials found in the author's apartment after his disappearance. These include his original manuscript and news clippings. Entries from the author's personal journal were not originally intended for publication.

From the Journal of
David Bergantino
May 5, 1994

My agent called—

I GOT THE JOB!!!

Today, I start work on the official novelization of *Wes Craven's New Nightmare.* I'm gonna be *published!* (Insert small-victory dance here.)

Of course, my parents first asked if I got that in writing. *Then* they gushed about how happy they were. Whatever . . .

But this is where it all begins!

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